

CATHOLIC FAITH CHALLENGED - 4



CHANGE THE TRACK

**BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS ON
COVID – 19**



Dr. Michael Karimattam



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Dr. MICHAEL KARIMATTAM

The world is at a stand still with the Pandemic, Covid-19 that started in China. Within a short period, it has spread all over the world. All the scientists have been working hard in vain to control this micro virus. This tiny creature that has not even a nucleus of its own has affected everyone. Rich and poor, aged and youth, political and religious leaders all are affected by this pandemic.

What message is God communicating to us by this pandemic? This book is searching an answer to this question in the pages of the Bible, both OT and NT. The words of Prophet Joel, addressed to the people of Israel in the context of a locust invasion, "Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing" (Jl 2, 12-13) is an example of the urgent call to conversion God is addressing to the whole world now.

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Scripture

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biblical reflections on

Covid – 19

Dr. Michael Karimattam

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Covid – 19

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English

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Introduction

A Curse of God? A Punishment? A Creation of Satan?

Over the last 24 months, the world has been whipped into a state of shock by the rapid spread of the Corona Virus. Preachers in the world over have wasted no time in declaring that it is a clear sign of God's curse on humanity. A few others have gone on to assert that it is a punishment meted out by God on an erring people. Numerous others have interpreted it as signaling the end of the world itself. However, there are others who reject all these theories summarily and say it is actually the handiwork of Satan.

This last view has indeed many supporters. They point to the fact that all the places of worship are kept closed today. Even a gathering of five or more persons for a prayer service or so, is forbidden by law. This restriction has impacted the Christian community the most. Christians are unable to participate in the Holy Mass or to receive any of the Sacraments. The faithful are not allowed to assemble for any purpose whatsoever. It seems to be clear that Satan has in fact succeeded in driving people away from God.

What can be said about all these speculations? Especially in the light of the Biblical teachings? Are there any parallels in the ancient Biblical history? Any incidents in the Biblical accounts that would shed light on today's situation?

This book was originally written in Malayalam and published in May, 2021, when Covid 19 was spreading very fast. Even though the pandemic has subsided to a certain extent, the lessons it teaches have a relevance that transcends time. Hence we are publishing this English edition. The translation was prepared by Sr. Glorista Arackal SABS. Mr Joseph Raj, Management Consultant based in Mumbai, went through the translation meticulously and made many corrections and valuable suggestions for improvement. May God bless them for their hard work. A word of thanks to Fr. Jinoy Joseph OFMCAp, managing director, Pavantama Printers and Publishers, Calicut and all his staff for bringing out this English edition.

Yet Even Now

“But even now,” says the Lord, “repent sincerely and return to me with fasting and weeping and mourning. Let your broken heart show your sorrow; tearing your clothes is not enough.” Come back to the Lord your God. He is kind and full of mercy; he is patient and keeps his promise; he is always ready to forgive and not punish”. (Joel 2, 12-13).

There was a severe attack of locusts at the beginning of the 4th century B.C. At that time, Prophet Joel made his entry, as it were, into the world with the Word of God. There seems some similarity between the attack of locusts and Covid-19 virus which originated in China around December 2019 and spread quickly to all parts of the world.

A sincere attempt has been made in this book to find out what message, if any, God is conveying to the world through this dreadful disease. We could find accounts of many pandemics similar to Covid-19 in the Bible. By studying them carefully, we could draw useful lessons for our times and for our own struggles with the disease.

Covid – 19

Covid – 19 is the short form for “Corona virus disease 2019”. The virus started in China, specifically in the city of Wuhan, the capital of the Huawei Region. The disease belongs to a group which exhibits acute respiratory symptoms. Corona is a Latin word, which means crown. The virus has been given the name ‘Corona’ because of its shape.

Some of the symptoms of this disease include fever, cough, suffocation, body pain, sour throat, and diarrhea. When the disease becomes acute, it turns into pneumonia. As of now, no medicine or effective treatment is available for this fast-spreading disease. As a result, the entire world is engulfed in mortal fear about contracting the virus.

Unfortunately, Covid-19 has already spread to all parts of the world. According to the WHO report issued on 4 May 2020, the disease has infected 212 nations. North Korea and a few other smaller nations have not provided any data about this illness. This, however, is not to be construed as if these countries have warded off the disease. Any day they might find themselves included in the list of the affected nations.

According to reports, the developed countries have recorded the highest number of infected cases and deaths due to Covid-19. USA alone accounts for almost one third of all the cases, both in terms of infection and the number of deaths. The good Health care System of a country has not made too much of a difference.

The death rate is on the increase in some countries while it is decreasing in some others. As the disease is spreading fast, everyone is worried and concerned about the future. Thousands of people have lost their jobs and they have no way of meeting even their basic needs. Countless people live and work far away from their home towns and their families. Reuniting with their families amidst this pandemic has become their immediate priority.

Even in Kerala we have witnessed the miseries of workers from other states who are stranded here and are wanting to go home. Similarly, we see the plight of Malayalee's returning back to Kerala from other states and distant countries.

Even though the Government is trying to handle all matters in a professional manner, the levels of anxiety and fear among the people have not abated. The country's rulers are naturally concerned about the future. When will all these afflictions end? What does the future hold for us? There are those who say that severe famines and miseries the world has never seen in a hundred years are waiting to happen. The economy is in deep trouble and the general indicators are worrisome. All in all, people find themselves in a state of turmoil, darkness and uncertainty.

The scientists say that it might take months for developing effective remedies and preventive medicines. At the same time, there are companies which are trying to get the patent for the vaccines. Organizations, in the business of producing masks and medical equipment's, are making use of the situation to increase their businesses. Even death is used to generate higher incomes and profits. We have, therefore, a serious question in hand. Is Satan the ultimate winner in the present situation, as some have claimed?

Even as Covid-19 is having a field day all over the world, we are getting chilling information about its origin. Atomic bombs and chemical weapons aside, nations have invented measures, much cheaper and more effective, to kill off people among the enemy ranks. That is what Corona virus is. There are rumors that the virus escaped from the laboratory of a very large country, while some experiments were being carried out. Nations are accusing each other for causing the disaster.

Alongside, some organizations are making the most of the situation, earning millions of dollars for themselves from the epidemic. When we hear of all this, we cannot but think that the claim, that the virus has been spread deliberately, might well be true. It is, therefore, necessary to study

the Bible to gain a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding the malady.

This is only a Warning: Teaching of Jesus

What comes to our mind first is Jesus' response to two incidents, which were brought to his attention. St. Luke has recorded the episode.

“At that time some people were there who told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices to God. Jesus answered them, “Because those Galileans were killed in that way, do you think it proves that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No indeed! And I tell you that if you do not turn from your sins, you will all die as they did. What about those eighteen people in Siloam who were killed when the tower fell on them? Do you suppose this proves that they were worse than all the other people living in Jerusalem? No indeed! And I tell you that if you do not turn from your sins, you will all die as they did” (Lk 13, 1-5).

During the time of Jesus, there were many who belonged to a terrorist group called “Zealots”. They were determined to attack the ruling power, the Roman Empire. The majority of the Zealots hailed from Galilee. During the Feasts of Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles, millions of Jews would throng Jerusalem. Zealots too would be among them. They would mix with the swarming crowds and kill the Roman soldiers. The Roman army would instantly retaliate and massacre the Jews without verifying who were the real culprits. This was one of the incidents that people were relating to Jesus.

The second incident mentioned to Jesus also happened during the time of Pontius Pilate. There was a perenni-

al problem of water shortage in Jerusalem. To solve the problem once and for all, Pilate decided to make a canal for bringing water into the city. Romans were experts in the technique of moving waters through tunnels, bridges and ducts. When a tower was being built in Siloam, as part of the project, there was an accident which resulted in the death of eighteen people.

The incident could have been interpreted as a punishment inflicted by God on those eighteen persons. But Jesus did not do so. In fact, Jesus warned the people not to conclude that those who died were sinners and that the others were holy. Jesus always forbade viewing an accident as a punishment or as a blessing. God does not punish or reward people immediately. Jesus advised them to hold off their judgment. He made them understand that God does not operate in this manner.

Jesus spoke similarly about curse when his disciples asked Him about a blind man who was begging at the gate of Jerusalem Temple. “As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been born blind. His disciples asked him, “Teacher, whose sin caused him to be born blind? Was it his own or his parents’ sin?” Jesus answered, “His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents’ sins. He is blind so that God’s power might be seen at work in him” (Jn 9, 1-3).

Some proclaim that sin of the ancestors would hound the family members for generations and that they would suffer misfortunes, illnesses and miseries all through their lives. However, Jesus put an end to all such theories. Whatever happens is ordained by God for a higher purpose.

God's Intolerance

The Old Testament does say that punishment would last through generations. The law, for example, prescribes that people should worship God alone and nothing else, "I am the Lord your God, *Worship no god but me. Do not bow down to any idol or worship it, because I am the Lord your God and I tolerate no rivals. I bring punishment on those who hate me and, on their descendants, down to the third and fourth generation*" (Ex 20, 2-5).

People could raise a question whether intolerance is an acceptable trait in a person? Intolerance and jealousy in the Godhead are aimed at safeguarding what one has. Jealousy in this context is not against the success or the growth of others. Rather, jealousy here is a force which prevents one's children from falling victims to machinations of others. Just like a jealous mother hen who, when in danger, protects her chicks under her wings and fights with the enemy with all her might, God protects His people.

The sacred author speaks about jealousy and punishment for breaking the Commandments, mainly to demonstrate the importance of the first Commandment. If people were to worship any idols, they will be subjected to slavery again. God liberated them performing many miracles and guided them through the desert. He led them to the valley of Mount Sinai where He accepted them as His own people through a Covenant. They must not worship idols and become slaves again. This is the singular purpose of all the Commandments.

The sacred author issued a warning that punishment for breaking the precepts of the Covenant would last for generations. This was meant to emphasize the importance of honoring the Commandments. People of Israel were

seen as a collective personality. It was a long-held belief that sin or sanctity of an individual would impact his or her entire community. As such, everyone is responsible for everyone one else. However, this belief was discarded later on. From the time of Prophet Jeremiah, emphasis shifted to personal responsibility.

Personal Responsibility

“When that time comes, people will no longer say, “The parents ate the sour grapes, But the children got the sour taste. ‘Instead, those who eat sour grapes will have their own teeth set on edge; and everyone will die because of their own sin” (Jer 31, 29-30). Personal responsibility was stressed by Prophet Ezekiel with greater force and clarity. “It is the one who sins who will die. A son is not to suffer because of his father’s sins, nor a father because of the sins of his son. Good people will be rewarded for doing good, and evil people will suffer for the evil they do” (Eze 18, 20).

Chapter 18 of the Book of Ezekiel deals entirely with the theme of personal responsibility. This was repeated in the Book of Deuteronomy, leaving no room for doubt about change in belief about personal responsibility. *“Parents are not to be put to death for crimes committed by their children, and children are not to be put to death for crimes committed by their parents; people are to be put to death only for a crime they themselves have committed” (Dt 24, 16).*

This clear enunciation rules out any supposition that those who were affected by Covid-19 and died are being punished by God. However, we can perceive the epidemic to be a warning from God. Words of Jesus provide credence to this conjecture. Before the two incidents cited above, Je-

sus had warned the people about reading the signs of the times and the necessity to reorient their lives accordingly. St. Luke makes a mention of this incident.

Recognize the Signs

“Jesus said also to the people, “When you see a cloud coming up in the west, at once you say that it is going to rain - and it does. And when you feel the south wind blowing, you say that it is going to get hot - and it does. Hypocrites! You can look at the earth and the sky and predict the weather; why, then, don't you know the meaning of this present time?” (Lk 12, 54-56).

Mediterranean Sea lies on the Western side of Palestine. When the clouds come up from the sea, there will be rain. The desert is situated on the Southern side of Palestine. When the wind comes from the south, people know that the weather would be hot and dry. With the help of these examples, Jesus told them about the signs of the time but they failed to understand his message. The biggest sign of all was Jesus himself who stood in their midst, but yet they failed to recognize him.

The teachings and the activities of Jesus were clear signs that God gave to the people but they did not understand their meaning. After pointing out these signs to His disciples, Jesus asked them to make a decision (Lk 7, 18-23). He concluded his message with a stern warning, *“Blessed is he who takes no offense at me” (Lk 7, 23)*. This was directed not only at those who had asked him questions but at all the people.

The only occasion that Jesus obliged any such request was when the religious leaders sought a sign. It was the sign of Jonah and the repentance and conversion of the people of Nineveh (Mt 16, 1-4). Later on, Jesus lamented

over Jerusalem for failing to read the signs of the time (Lk 19, 41-44), a warning to all for failing to understand God's will.

Summary

The great epidemic we are enduring is not to be viewed as a curse or a punishment. Nor is it to be interpreted as signaling the end of the World. It is to be seen as a serious warning and a call to conversion. No doubt the churches remain empty and the celebrations have been made simple. It is not a sign that Satan has won. We have to look deeper to find out what message God is conveying to us through this terrible ordeal. It is certainly an invitation to change and to grow.

How did a tiny little virus terrorize the whole world? What is God communicating to us through this pandemic? If we go through the Bible, we would possibly get some hints and gain some insights. That is exactly what we are trying to do through this study.

The Glory of Man

“Then God said, “And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small.” So, God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female” (Gen 1, 26-27).

The deadly Corona virus has brought the whole humanity to its knees. The very survival of the human race has come under threat from the virus, which seems to be moving around the globe unchecked, vanquishing everyone on its way. We are embarking upon a serious search to find out what the Lord could be telling us through this pandemic.

A re-reading of the Bible

The Bible represents the written articulation of what God has revealed about Himself and His salvific plan. Though the revelations occurred thousands of years ago, their relevance extends beyond time and space. We shall be able to recognize the application of the Word of God to our own times, if we study the Bible in the light of today’s events. This is exactly what we intend to do through this book.

Primeval History

The first book in the Bible is the Book of Genesis which narrates the origin of all the creatures. The first

eleven Chapters form the primeval history. Of the eleven Chapters, the first three deal with the creation of all the creatures including man. Every creature was assigned a particular task on earth and God has ordained how the various creatures would have to relate to one another.

Two Different Presentations

There are two different accounts about the creation of the universe. Some differences can be seen in the two versions such as the literary form and the order of presentation. The first description is found in Genesis Chapter 1, 1-2,4a, and is presented in the form of a hymn. Bible scholars have concluded that this was formulated in the 6th century B.C., during the time of the Babylon captivity. God is praised for His creation. Such hymns can be found in Psalms 19, 95, 97 and 104. The source of this text is thought to be the last of the 4 traditions of Pentateuch, namely the Priestly Tradition (P).

The second description of the creation narrative is to be found in Genesis 2, 4b-25. Bible scholars believe that this was developed during the time of David and Solomon in the 10th century B.C. Since the name Yahweh was used before it was revealed to Moses (Ex 3, 14-15), this is a theory proposed by some German Scholars. In the German language, “Yahweh” is spelled as “Jahweh” hence, the letter “J” is used for this particular tradition.

In both descriptions, man is shown as the care-taker of all the creatures on earth. His exact responsibilities are commented on and explained in depth. An analysis of the Biblical verses would shed light on the what is happening in the world.

Man, God's representative on Earth

According to the priestly tradition (P), creation of the universe was completed in a period of six days, and God rested on the seventh day. The people of Israel were in exile in Babylon, after losing their kingdom and everything with it, their king, and their Temple.

Observance of Sabbath was a sign that helped the people of Israel to affirm their identity before the Gentiles. A theological basis for observing the Sabbath was set by presenting the creation story in the framework of seven days. By keeping the Sabbath, people participate in the rest of God who is reported to have rested on the seventh day. This may well be a foretaste of eternal rest with God that is promised to us by Jesus Himself.

In the first Creation narrative, man was created last. All other creatures were brought into being with a simple command, "Let there be". But before bringing man into existence, the sacred author tells that God reflected on the nature and goal of making man. Indeed, man was the second creation of the sixth day. *"Then God said, "And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small" (Gen 1, 26).*

Image – Likeness

To say that God took time to think and to reflect before deciding to make man shows the significance of the creation that was to take place. Whom did God consult in making this decision? Some say He must have spoken to angels, but there is no basis for such a conclusion.

The original Hebrew word, "*Elohim*" is translated as "God". *Elohim* is plural in form. Grammatically, subject,

predicate and object must be matching. Since Elohim, the subject is a plural form, the predicate should also be in the plural. That is why, words in the plural form, like “us” and “our”, were used. Therefore, the statement does not imply that there were more than one God or that God consulted someone else.

Imagination of the sacred author aside, there is a divine mystery contained in this usage of the plural form. Years and eons later, it would be revealed through Jesus Christ that there are three persons in one God. Elohim gives a hint about the deep relationship existing among the three persons of the Holy Trinity. It is a revelation about God that we recognize in the Bible. It is a pointer not only to nature of God but also to nature of man. The sacred author makes use of two particular words, which require to be examined closely.

Image

“*Selem*” is a Hebrew word that is translated as “*image*”. It also means representation, statue etc. When the Philistines returned the Ark of the Covenant, they also sent along some golden images of rats and similar creatures as their gifts. In this narration, the word used is “*Selem*” (1 Sam 6, 5-11). Prophet Amos used the word “*Selem*”, when he instructed people of Israel, who engaged in idol worship, to discard idols (Amos 5, 26). There is sufficient evidence to conclude that *Selem* means image. God created man in His own image. The choice of the word *Selem* shows the importance God gave to man.

Likeness

“*Demuth*” is another word in Hebrew which means ‘*looks like*’. Daniel uses this word in his comment, “one in

the likeness of the sons of men” (Dan 10, 16). By adding this word the sacred author is telling us that man is not a duplicate of God or God’s statue, but there is something in man that makes him seem similar to God; but he is not another God.

When these two words, image and likeness, are used together, the importance man has, and the position God has accorded to him, become clearer. This is somewhat like the statue of a king placed in the center of the city. Statue is not the king but it reminds the passers-by of the king. On important occasions, those who are not able to travel to the palace to meet the king to pay their homage, offer their respects to the statue with flowers and salutations as it represents the king. Likewise, man represents God on earth. Before analyzing man’s responsibilities in this role, certain points about man need to be discussed first.

The Glory of Man

Man was created differently from all other creatures and he was given dominion over all of them. This seems to be the meeting point of Divine Revelation and the Theory of Evolution. Man came into existence last, but he is greater than all other creatures on earth.

The foundation of his greatness is his relationship with God and the fact that he was created in the image and likeness of God. What does ‘being created in the image and likeness of God’ mean? This is not clearly explained in the creation story. We have, however, certain hints about it as man has been made very differently from all other creatures. He is endowed with the capacity to know God, to communicate with Him and to organize his life according to His will. This could be termed as freedom or as conscience or as the ability to make decisions. To put it in

another way, man has body and soul. The image of God is imprinted on his soul.

“When Adam was 130 years old, he had a son who was like him, and he named him Seth.” (Gen 5, 3). The way Adam’s son is described is the way man is described in the creation narrative. All this shows that God created human beings as His children. Man was created through the breath of God. Thus, man participates in the Divine nature. He should be aware of the special place which has been assigned to him in the universe. Man is not just a monkey which lost its tail towards the end of evolution. He is far greater and bigger, and is close to God, as close as a human can be.

Created as Equal

God created all human beings as equals. There is no justification for any discrimination. It is man, and not God, who introduced divisions among people, based on color, creed, caste, occupation and status. Discrimination is entirely man’s creation. Bible states that all human beings are equals and that they share glory, rights and responsibilities equally. No one is to enslave anyone else to lord over. There are no superior or inferior human beings. All are children of God with the same dignity and similar rights.

Equality of Man and Woman

Equality of sexes, of man and woman, is another of the themes to be seen in the Bible. Both man and woman have been created in the image and the likeness of God. Many have a mistaken notion that God is masculine. This requires correction. Somehow, for long God had been portrayed as a man. Possibly, Bible gave rise to this erroneous notion, as God was largely pictured as a man in the Holy

Book. God is said to be the Father, and the Word who became flesh the Son. Even the Holy Spirit is projected as a masculine Person.

Such a conception of God has existed from the time of the early Fathers, supported by the patriarchal society and sanctioned by the Word of God. The story of the first sin seemed to reinforce this line of thinking. At the same time, portions of the Bible which highlight feminine side of God were not given much attention, such as, Is 66, 12-13, Is 49, 15-16 and Ps 27, 10. However, the Bible has always held that man and woman were created in the image and the likeness of God.

Feminine Values

Most of women's liberation movements, knowingly or unknowingly, stress masculine qualities and neglect feminine virtues. Largely, they adopt an aggressive posture in dealing with feminine issues. In fact, they seem engaged in a power struggle with man, which is likely to result in producing an inferior masculine version of woman at best. Maybe emphasis on masculine traits is necessary for the preservation of human race. But masculine strengths alone will not suffice for the growth of humanity. Feminine qualities are also required, possibly far more, to preserve and to nurture life.

A love that prompts one to forget oneself, sensitivity to the needs of others, mercy and compassion, are all feminine traits. Such soft, caring qualities could be seen in men too but they do not get highlighted. Only a woman can accept the source of life into her body and carry a baby for nine months, nurture it with her own flesh and blood, and once the baby is born, provide it the much-needed nutrition through her breast milk. She is always busy caring for the

welfare of her baby, as she would feed, wash and nurse the child to maturity. If society were to discard these nurturing qualities, all that would remain will be indifference, alienation, competitiveness and death, and humans would be turned into mere robots.

Of late, society seems to be losing the caring spirit of a mother. It is a great tragedy that some mothers do not value any more their role in bringing up a baby, viewing it to be beneath their dignity. There is an urgent need for reaffirmation of a mother's role in bringing up children. A child requires the care and attention of a mother for growing into a happy, confident and well-rounded personality. This is not to say that father's role is unimportant. Both father and mother contribute to the balanced development of the child.

Some women succeed in persuading their husbands to share their responsibility in bringing up children. This helps the father to get close to his child. Irrespective of who provides the care and the love, the child needs them in abundance for its growth into maturity. Corona epidemic has forced people to stay largely indoors. This has unwittingly helped families to develop close relationships.

Many husbands have learned to help their spouses in attending to the needs of their children, and thus end up spending time with them. This is a God-sent opportunity to examine all of our relationships. Are they what they should be? Bible can provide us the required assistance for a critical reflection on this area of our lives.

Summary

The Universe did not come into existence by itself. It was not an outcome of a "big bang". It was created by

God, and that too with a purpose and a goal. Every little thing found in the Universe has a place in God's plan.

Man and woman are created to represent God on earth. Both carry the image and the likeness of God. All the people are God's children. They were created equal, with the same dignity, rights and obligations. The only difference is what is seen between a man and a woman. Color of the skin, place of birth, work carried out, language spoken are, no doubt differences, but not substantial enough to justify discriminations of any kind.

Man and woman carry the image of God. The differences in their biological and psychological make-up are intended to equip them to carry out their distinct responsibilities. So, what is required is respect, love and co-operation, and not competition and rivalry.

Much can be accomplished if man and woman recognize their complimentary natures and use them wisely. They are certainly different from each other, but not superior or inferior to the other in any way. Developing awareness and appreciation of their specific gifts and qualities will do them immense good. This will open their minds to value the differences between them and not to view the other as a rival. Mutual respect and honest appreciation would contribute to fulfilling the plan God has for each of them.

Dominion - Responsibility

“And God blessed them, and said, “Have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth and bring it under their control. I am putting you in charge of the fish, the birds, and all the wild animals” (Gen 1, 28).

In the previous article, two words, image and likeness, which show forth the glory of man, were discussed. Human beings, created in the image and the likeness of God, are His representatives on earth. The basis of their glory is their deep relationship with God. The Bible repeatedly speaks of God’s plan for man in this Universe and the quality of relationship he has with nature and the other creatures on earth.

Blessing

The significant thing to note is that God blesses all human beings. The Hebrew word for blessing is “*Barak*”. The word expresses the sum total of all the blessings God showers on people. Life and responsibilities granted to man are the gratuitous gifts of God. The responsibilities point to three things.

First, be fruitful, multiply. The original Hebrew word is “*Pru*”, which is derived from the term “*Para*”, meaning “fruitful”, multiply etc. God commanded human beings to increase and multiply, so that nothing of what God has created would become extinct. This was precisely the reason for creating humans as man and woman and entrusting

them with the responsibility of begetting children and caring for them on earth. This was just one of man's responsibilities. God expected of man many other things.

Subdue

The original Hebrew word for 'Subdue' is "*Kabash*". The word actually means 'to wage war and subdue, to enslave, to bring under the authority' etc. (Eg. Is 14, 2; Lev 26, 17). Consequently, the term '*Subdue*' has given rise to many misunderstandings. Some were led to regard the world as an enemy to fight against and to overpower, with all their might. Western countries have chosen this option.

It is understandable that God's injunction 'to multiply and subdue the earth' got interpreted erroneously. We need to question ourselves whether it is right to regard earth and all creatures as enemies to be conquered by force. Maybe there are no easy answers. To find an answer, we have to study the passages which follow God's command 'to multiply and subdue the earth', and the descriptions about earth and man in the second chapter of Genesis.

Dominion

The third blessing God bestowed on man was authority to rule over all creatures. The original Hebrew word was "*Radah*" which means to have dominion over, to rule, bring under one's control (Ex. 2Chr 28, 10, Mi 7, 19; Zec 9, 15). Both words have similar meaning. By using them in parallel form, the particular idea is given greater emphasis.

At the same time, it is important to note that God blessed all creatures and plants to grow and to multiply on earth. Each creature has its own goal, mission and responsibility. The plants serve as food for other creatures. In the beginning, according to the Bible, human beings were vegetari-

ans. It was after the great flood that they began to consume meat and turned into non-vegetarians (Gen 9, 1-3).

Responsibility

“*Subdue, have dominion over the creatures*”. This is not to be construed as though man was given unlimited authority over the universe and he could do anything with it. Some took it as a license to abuse nature. Such a misconception has resulted in many calamities. Erroneous interpretation of the Bible supported such dangerous moves. There were also accusations that Christians and their religious book, the Bible, are responsible for encouraging people to misuse nature. Hence, we need to examine carefully the meaning and purpose of the blessings and responsibilities granted to man.

Do not Become Slaves

The creation narrative, found in the first Chapter of Genesis, emphasizes that the universe and all that is contained therein are created by God. They are all mere creatures. Some might wonder why so much emphasis is placed on this issue. At the time the Bible was written, people used to worship the sun, the moon, the stars, the animals, the birds and other creatures, considering them to be gods. They believed that these gods controlled their lives. People offered them sacrifices with great fear and respect. It is the Word of God which freed them from such misconceptions.

In many ancient religions, planets were venerated as gods. They are worshiped even today by some people. But the Bible teaches us that the planets and animals are not gods but mere creatures and they have no power over us. Forces of cosmos are not celestial beings, but creations of the Almighty God. Indeed, God has given man dominion

over them as he was created in the image and the likeness of God.

Freedom of the Children of God

According to the creation narrative in the first Chapter of the Book of Genesis, God completed the work of creation in six days. Among all the creatures, man alone was endowed with freedom. Only man has the capacity to use his intelligence to seek God and to communicate with Him. All other creatures, animals and plants, are entirely subservient to the laws of nature. They are conditioned to act the way they do.

God's command to exercise dominion over all creatures is a clear pointer to man's freedom, which is a direct outcome of having been created in the image and the likeness of God. God has planted His laws in people's hearts. He has given them freedom to live by them or to disregard them. If they disobey God's laws, there will be consequences, which are detailed in the next chapter. The spot light here is on the freedom man has. Of course, he is not to forget that it is God who has given him freedom and he carries responsibility to act as God's representative on earth.

Limitation of Dominion

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it”. This is a command addressed to all the peoples in the world. However one should not forget that all the animate and inanimate creatures too have the right to live and to thrive on the earth. Briefly put, the earth belongs to all. This has two implications:

1. Man cannot handle the earth as he likes. Earth is like a mother which gives life to all and nurtures them. There-

fore, man should deal with the earth with respect and use its resources to the extent necessary for survival. Nothing should be done which might disturb the earth's equilibrium. The basic lessons of fraternity are implied here. Man is not to harm nature in any way. Rather, he has to safeguard it as a King would protect his people, as a shepherd his sheep and as a farmer his land.

Can we say that the root cause of all the calamities in the world is man's neglect of his duty towards nature? An honest review is required to determine the cause behind air pollution, water pollution, destruction of the forests etc. In many places, people have no access to drinking water or to clean air. Amazon is popularly known as the lungs of the earth. However, there has been indiscriminate felling of trees in the Amazon forests.

Amazon aside, plants are dying all over the world because of today's reckless culture of consumption. When the misuse reached its maximum, nature reacted violently with climate change. Today the biggest evil afflicting the world is undoubtedly Covid-19. But we can expect far greater threats to our life, health and safety if we do not change course quickly.

2. The earth belongs to all the People. Inexplicably, this truth is often overlooked. A few nations flaunt their enormous economic powers by putting on display their destructive weapons and military hardware. They have erected walls around, sealing their borders, and denying entry to the poor. This is happening at the national and the global levels. Thus, millions are left with no land even to put up a small hut. Without a place of their own, they roam around the world like pygmies and refugees.

What of the right God gave to all the peoples of the world to have dominion over the earth? Who authorized

the land-lords to retain vast tracts of land as their own? Is the term “dominion” being misinterpreted? How many wars have been fought over this issue! Some governments treat their people as slaves. Unfortunately, there are ideologies which support such mindsets. All these ideas stand challenged by the teaching presented in the Creation narrative.

Summary

1. God created man and woman and commanded them to multiply and to fill the earth. Children are God’s biggest blessing to man. It was to beget children that God made man and woman. Therefore, if anyone considers marriage as an inconvenient institution and avoids having children, viewing them as obstacles to his happiness and comfort, he is acting, for certain, against the will of God.

2. The universe and everything therein was created by God to serve man. Hence, man should not allow himself to be enslaved by any of the creatures. No creature, however powerful, is to be worshipped as God.

3. No planet or any force of nature can exercise control over man. Man is a free being and he should not surrender his freedom to any creature whatsoever.

4. This earth and its produce belong to all creatures. Therefore, man should take care of nature, and not abuse it in any manner. He has certainly the right to live comfortably. Those concerned about protecting wild life should bear in mind that man has rights which supersede the rights of animals and wild life. He has the right to live safely in his land.

5. All the people have a right to live on this earth. There are, however, limits to the amount of property one

can own as others too have a right to the resources in the world. This is valid not only for individuals but also states and nations.

6. Everyone should be conscious of the rights of others in the world to a decent life. He should adhere to the laws of nature, ensuring protection to nature and promoting fraternity among all the peoples of the world. Then, the plan of God will be fulfilled and we could confidently say, *“God looked at everything he had made, and he was very pleased” (Gen 1, 31)*. How have certain things gone out of control and have turned out to be the way they are? This will be discussed later. But first, we need to look at the second creation narrative found in Chapter 2 of the Book of Genesis.

4

Man and the Earth

“Then the Lord God took some soil from the ground and formed a man out of it; he breathed life-giving breath into his nostrils and the man began to live. Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the East, and there he put the man he had formed. Then the Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and guard it” (Gen 2, 7-15).

The second creation narrative is found in Gen 2, 4b-25. It is presented in a story form. Not just a simple, plain story, but a story that discloses certain profound truths. This is a literary form known as myth. Because it is a mythological narrative, everything like the characters, the incidents and the conversations assume deeper meaning. On the one hand it is so simple that even a child can understand it, but on the other, it is so profound that even a great scholar will have difficulty in comprehending its full meaning. The story is therefore subject to more than one interpretation.

Lord Our God

We are all familiar with creation narration, particularly how man was brought into existence. The LORD God formed man out of the dust from the ground, and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and man became a living being. In the first Chapter, the creator is referred to as *God*, the original Hebrew word being “*Elohim*”. In the second Chapter, the creator is referred to as “*God the Lord*”, the

original Hebrew equivalent being “*Yahweh Elohim*”. Yahweh is the name God revealed to Moses (Ex 3, 14-15). It is a Hebrew word which means “*I am*”. Significantly, ‘I am’ is said to be the definition of God. God reveals Himself through action and His action liberates people from slavery.

Here is what Bible says about how God revealed His name to Moses: “*I am the Lord; I will rescue you and set you free from your slavery to the Egyptians. I will raise my mighty arm to bring terrible punishment upon them, and I will save you*” (Ex 6, 6). The “Ten Commandments” was part of the Covenant God made with the people of Israel. The first of the Ten Commandments also tells us who God is. “*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you were slaves. Worship no God but me*” (Ex 20, 2-3).

The Almighty God assumed the job of a potter to make man, which shows the intimate relationship between God and man. In the first creation narrative, man was created last, and was given supremacy over all the creatures. In the second narration, man was created first. All the other creatures were made for his benefit. The first narration says that God created everything through word but the second narration states that God created man and the creatures through dramatic actions. Differences can be noticed not only in the literary form but also in the emphasis placed on certain things. They require closer examination.

Dust of the Earth

Interestingly, no details are found in this narrative about creation of the earth or the planets. The state of the earth before man came into being is a clear evidence to the close relationship between man and the earth. The earth

was arid and dry, without life or any creatures. It was a wasteland because there was no one to till the earth. Resourcefulness of the land was dependent on the presence of man.

The earth was a wasteland with no life, no water and no moisture; all of these are indications of emptiness. It was from this dust that man was created. When man disobeyed God and the first sin was committed, dust became a point of discussion. God said to man, *“You are dust, and to dust you shall return”* (Gen 3, 19). Dust shows temporariness of man’s existence and, in fact, his nothingness. Man’s sinful nature brought into sharp focus his mortality and his worthlessness, when away from God. At the same time, dust points to the sort of mother–son relationship man has with the earth.

Life-giving Breath of God

“God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils; and man became a living being”. This is a simple story with a deep meaning. The Hebrew word *“Napah”* is rendered as ‘breathed’ in English. The word would also mean strong breeze (Is 54, 14; Ez 22, 20). *“Napah’* was used in connection with the incident of breathing on the dry bones to make them come alive. *“God said to me, “Mortal man, prophesy to the wind. Tell the wind that the Sovereign Lord commands it to come from every direction, to breathe into these dead bodies, and to bring them back to life”* (Ez 37, 9).

It is Life that we are talking about. The lifeless clay image came alive with the breath of God. What the sacred author is alluding to is that on one hand, man is nothing; he is lifeless, mortal, weak and unproductive like the dust of the earth. On the other hand, God’s breath makes him alive

and throbbing. It is his relationship with God which transforms him into a living human being. If this relationship is severed, if the life-giving breath is withdrawn, he would be mere dust once again. He was made from dust and into dust he would return.

Alive

“*Nephesh*” is the Hebrew word, which is translated as “man became a living being”. It carries the meaning ‘being alive’, ‘breathes’, ‘lives’ etc. “*Nephesh*” is translated as “*Psyche*” in Greek and as “*Anima*” in Latin. There is a definite hint about “soul” in these translations. No mention, though, is found anywhere that God created the soul apart from the body. However, the assertion that it was the breath of God that made the body alive insinuates such a conclusion.

Two words, dust and life, point to the mortality and the immortality of man. Man is dust who lives by the breath of God. He is a wonderful creature in which glory and misery exist together. What is referred to as image and likeness in the first narration, is spoken of as the breath of God in the second narration. In short, man is dust who is sustained by the breath of God. If the breath of God is withdrawn, man will cease to be alive and will return to dust again.

Man and the Paradise

“The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed” (Gen 2, 8). Eden is used as the name of a place. The root of Eden is “*Adan*” which means prosperity, luxury etc. The word used in Hebrew is “*Gan*”, which means garden, surrounded by a compound wall. The root of Gan is “*Ganan*” which means secure with fence or compound wall. In Greek this

is rendered as “*Paradaisos*” which is derived from the Persian word “*Peyridesa*”, meaning the garden of the Persian Kings. From this originated the English word, Paradise.

The Paradise, God’s gift to man, was the center of prosperity and a source of happiness. By gifting Paradise to man for his abode, God demonstrated the importance He placed on man. God walked with man and man could experience the presence of God. God made sure that man lacked nothing in the Paradise. Accordingly, God looked for a fitting companion to man. Before proceeding to provide a companion, God gave man a task in the Garden of Eden, the Paradise.

Cultivate and Protect

There were in fact two tasks that God entrusted to man: First, to grow plants and, second, to protect them. Both are intrinsically related. His primary mission was to grow vegetables, though, truly, this is more of an interpretation. The original word in Hebrew is “*Abad*” which has several nuances. The most obvious meaning is “work hard”, but it implies also the notion of serving, working as a servant and toiling like a slave.

The word “*Ebed*” is derived from “*Abad*” and it means servant, slave etc. “*Ebed*” is used in the “*Servant songs*” of Isaiah. The word also stands for worship. “*Worshiping God*” could be interpreted as working as a slave to God. This word is to be found in the Book of Exodus, in the context of God asking Moses to tell Pharaoh to liberate the people to worship him, “*Let my son go that he may serve me; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son*” (*Ex 4, 23*).

One thing is clear. God placed man in the garden to work hard as a servant of God. It was for this purpose that

man was given dominion over the earth. He was not to do anything he likes in the garden. Though he enjoyed all the comforts, conveniences and luxuries, he had to toil like a laborer and an agent of God. The garden did not really belong to man as he was like a servant of God. However, prosperity of the garden would depend on his work.

The second task given to man was to safeguard the garden. “*Shamar*”, the Hebrew word, is translated as ‘protect’ or ‘safe-guard’. Man has to protect the garden from dangers as a guard would. The garden is God’s and man can live there. He was, however, given the responsibility to guard it and to protect it.

Suitable Companion

“Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to live alone. I will make a suitable companion to help him” (Gen 2, 18). Though Paradise had all the luxuries, man must have felt lonely and so God decided to give him a suitable companion. The original Hebrew word is “*Ezer*” which means a helper, a suitable companion. It is derived from the root, “*Azar*” which means to help, to co-operate with all the tasks. The adjective “*Ken*” would imply that the helper would be suitable to him and she would match him in personality, thought patterns and aspirations. In short, God wanted the helper to be such that she would make man happy.

The first narration about creation states that man and woman were created in the image and the likeness of God. Man is meant to live, not alone just by himself, but in a community. He can find complete happiness only in relationships. This was the plan of God for man. If this were so, it is clear that man-woman relationship has two purposes: a) Begetting children, and b) Mutual love and

companionship. Both are very important end-goals and neglect of either would be defeating God's purpose and therefore displeasing to Him.

The sacred author elaborates on man's relationship with other creatures in the world. He makes it a point to stress that man is very different from animals. In fact, God asked man to name all the animals so as to demonstrate his supremacy over them. It appears that all the creatures were entrusted to man, whose responsibility it is to protect and to nurture them. The creatures belong to God, no doubt, but they have been placed under the watchful care of man.

Woman was created last and she was intended as a companion to man. A few points deserve our consideration. She was created from the rib of man, which is indicative of the deep relationship existing between man and woman. It also points to the equality of both the sexes. The narrative that man was put to sleep to have his rib removed is not to be interpreted as a surgery. Sleep represents the mystery of creation while the rib points to the equality of man and woman.

God ushered the woman to the man. He called her "Woman", which means she was fashioned out of him. The man exclaimed and said, "*This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man*" (Gen 2, 23). This new creation was different from all other creatures. The Hebrew words "Ish" and "Isha" are translated as man and woman. The similarity between the names, man and woman, signifies the spirit of unity between them.

However, the fact that man names her as woman can give rise to some misconceptions. Though at first, man proclaimed that they were equals, later on by naming her as

woman, he seemed to demonstrate his authority over her. This will be discussed subsequently.

Creation of woman signaled the completion of God's work of creation and making of Paradise. In the first narrative, creation ends with the comment, "*God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good*" (Gen 1, 31). In the second narration, the closing comment is a little different. "*The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed*" (Gen 2, 25).

Summary

The second creation narrative describes the relationship between man and earth. Man's position on earth is presented in a story form. He is a mixture of earthly soil and immortal breath of God. Earth is God's Garden that would provide for all the needs of man; he would lack nothing there.

Man is the guardian and the protector of the garden, which denotes his dignity and his responsibility. He must work hard to make the earth produce all that he needs for his sustenance and he has to guard it with great care. Work is akin to worship, because through his work man praises God. He is to worship, not any of the creatures, but only God.

Man is not alone. There exists a society consisting of a man and a woman. In this community there should be unity based on love. They must support each other, and not seek domination over the other. Neither has to be a slave to the other, but equal to each other.

The sacred author presents in a story form the kind of relationship which should exist between man and woman. Instructions are also found as to how they should deal with

all other creatures and nature itself. As long as there is harmony, everything would be fine. It will be known as Paradise. God envisions that in the Paradise, man would have an intimate relationship with God, with the woman, his companion, with the universe and with himself. This is in fact our own dream for the future. This theme will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Cursed Soil

“To Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3, 17-19).

The Book of Genesis, the third Chapter, explains how relationship between man and soil got ruined. Everything is narrated in a story form, including the account about the two brothers, Cain and Abel. What is highlighted is that the root cause of all of man’s miseries can be traced to the breaking of God’s commandment. With people abusing the universe in contravention of the will of God, the balance that existed between man and nature has been ruptured. In short, man is responsible for the miseries and sufferings he has to endure in the world.

The Forbidden Fruit

The sacred author gives special attention to two fruit trees in the Garden of Eden, which were entrusted to the care of man. They are the “Tree of life” and the “Tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. God had warned the man, *“The day you eat of the Tree of knowledge, you will die”*

(Gen 2, 9. 16-17). There are people who raise questions as to what was special about those two trees. We need to bear in mind that some of the biblical teachings are communicated in a story form and details of incidents narrated are symbolic, not to be taken literally.

Eating from the Tree of life would mean that the person would live forever and this was permissible. On the other hand, eating from the “Tree of the knowledge of good and evil” would indicate appropriating the power to decide what is good and what is evil and this was not permitted.

To put it in another way, man would be at liberty to decide what is good and what is evil according to his own whims and fancies. His own decision will be the sole criterion of morality. He would have no one above him, and he would not be obliged to obey any commandments, even those of God. Such were the false impressions created by Satan. However, the reason for prohibiting eating from the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil was very different.

Man is not a supreme being. He is a creature of God and as such he is obliged to live by the will of God. This is the message conveyed through the story of the forbidden fruit and the strict commandment not to eat of it. Man is to submit to God’s will and lead his life in accordance with God’s commandments. This would have been the case if man had not eaten the forbidden fruit. If someone who lives by God’s breath goes against His will, he is bound to lose his life. The end result will be death. That is how the paradise was lost.

Temptation

In the Book of Genesis, Chapter three, there appears a new character, namely the serpent, which is cunning and more devious than any other creature found on earth. The

Canaanites used to regard serpent as god and worshipped it. Women, more than men, were attracted to idol worship.

The festivals of the Canaanites were associated with cultic prostitution. Women designated for such worship were called in the Bible as “prostitutes” and the men as “dogs” (Dt. 23, 18). Many Israelites too were drawn to idol worship which moved them away from God and true worship. May be this was the reason why woman and serpent are presented as main characters in the first temptation.

The conversation between the woman and the serpent is a vivid account of the temptation which led to sin. First, God’s command was questioned and the matter was discussed at length. The initial response of the woman was a firm defense of God’s commandment, laying out the sinful nature of the act of eating the fruit and its grave consequences. Her arguments showed forth her great faith in God and her attitude of obedience. She repeated the commandment of God.

“The LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2,16-17).

But the serpent retorted strongly, depicting God as selfish for hiding the truth. She would acquire, the serpent argued, freedom and knowledge by eating the fruit. They would not die but their eyes would be opened and they would become like God. This, the serpent continued, was the reason for forbidding them to eat the fruit (Gen 3, 5). This is what temptation is, presenting evil as good and good as evil. As a rule, man chooses to do what he considers as good. Decisions are made after having recognized something good in the choice. Therefore, temptation always takes place on the conscious level.

The Commandment of God and serpent's reasoning were miles apart. The woman was faced with a dilemma, as to whom to believe, God or the serpent. Gradually her defenses weakened and she began to place her faith more in the serpent than in God's instructions. She was seized with a desire to become like God.

The serpent had questioned the rationale for obeying God. He asserted that such submission was equal to slavery and encouraged her to free herself and do what it takes to be like God. Behind every sin there is a temptation, which projects the evil as good and the good as evil. Sin is nothing but succumbing to such a temptation.

Sin

"Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness" (1 Jn 3, 4). Sin is lawlessness, a deliberate choice not to act on God's guidance and instructions, and preferring to trust the false promises of Satan, the evil force. In the midst of temptation, man loses the ability to discern good from evil. The confused mind often selects evil, mistaking it to be good. This is clearly seen in the events leading up to eating of the forbidden fruit. The sacred author provides a glimpse of the inner world of the person falling prey to the temptation.

"The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate" (Gen 3,6).

This is a plain, little story. We can recognize the essence of not only the first sin but of all the sins since the birth of humanity. It provides a clear picture of how temptation clouds the power of discrimination and pushes a person into sinful acts. A process initiated by the senses

overpowers the imagination, and ends up in forcing him into a wrong course of action. All the while, the only thing that dominates the person's mind is the assumed benefit that will accrue to him from the action. Inexplicably, he tends to lose sight of God's love, care, concern and His commandments. The entire focus is centered on the expected gains.

So, in this case, the only thing that occupied the woman's mind was the knowledge she would gain, that would make her equal to God, by eating of the fruit. Not only did she herself eat of the forbidden fruit, but she also shared it with her hapless husband and both ended up as partners in sin. But alas, what actually happened was, not attaining any new knowledge transforming them into Godlike beings, but acute awareness of their nudity and the consequent feeling of shame.

Nudity

As soon as they ate the fruit, *"The eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons"* (Gen 3, 7). Consuming the fruit did not lead them to fullness of knowledge, as was falsely promised, but to the awareness of their nudity. This should be seen in contrast with the first statement: *"The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed"* (Gen 2, 25).

Their eyes were opened to realize what they had achieved, rather what, in fact, they had lost, by breaking God's commandment. They lost all their precious possessions, their freedom, dignity and greatness. They lost the harmony which had existed because of the good relationship they had with God, with each other, with self and with the universe. They were no more comfortable with

themselves or with the other. Their hearts were filled with shame and fright, a feeling they had not known until then, and this fear prompted them to hide themselves from God and from each other.

Paradise was lost even before they were driven out by God. The sudden consciousness of their nudity, feeling of shame, their wanting to cover themselves and their futile attempts to avoid the gaze of God were consequences of their disobedience to God.

Trial – Judgment

God asked man, *“Where are you?”* And he said, *“I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself”*. He said, *“Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”* (Gen 3, 9-11). God asked him not because He did not know what they had done, but to make them aware of their transgression. What we are made to realize is the goodness of God, who comes in search of man and woman who were trying to hide from Him. The next question God put to them was about the cause of their embarrassment.

“Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Gen 3, 11). By breaking God’s commandment, man lost everything. They realized that the tempter who came in the form of serpent, was evil incarnate and all that he said were lies. Man’s response to God was intriguing. Rather than acknowledging the responsibility for his action, he threw the blame on the woman. *“The woman whom thou gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate”* (Gen 3, 12).

Man forgot the love song that he had sung when he

first beheld the woman God brought to him. What of his proclamation that the woman was ‘the bone of his bone and the flesh of his flesh’? By saying, “the woman you gave me”, man seemed to be hurling part of the blame on God Himself. All this is a consequence of sin. Sin destroys mutual relationship.

On being questioned, the woman confessed her guilt and conceded that she allowed herself to be cheated (Gen 3, 13). In a way the woman exhibited more integrity than the man. She did not blame the man or anyone else for her sin but faced the truth that she had succumbed to temptation.

Curse on Soil

God questioned the man and the woman about eating of the forbidden fruit, but not the serpent. However, when the verdict was pronounced, God started with the serpent. The progeny of the woman would crush the head of the serpent and humanity would be liberated from the dominion of sin. *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen 3, 15).*

There is no clear indication here that this progeny will be the Son of God. This was revealed much later. By stating that “You shall bruise his heel”, God indicated that this liberation would be achieved through the death of the Savior. This was the very first prophecy about the Savior and so it is called the first good news, Proto Evangelium (Gen. 3, 15).

For the woman, punishment was painful childbirth and domination of man over her (Gen 3, 16). Punishment pronounced on Adam was harder and more long-lasting. God the Lord said to man, *“Because you have listened to*

the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3, 17-19).

This stern assertion contains a summary of all the tribulations human beings are subjected to today. Although punishment was pronounced on man as a farmer, it would be applied to all the people, whatever their profession or the work they performed may be. All the adversities and calamities man would face all through his life is also implied in the punishment. All this has come to pass because man violated God’s commandment.

The earth was intended to meet man’s needs and he was to make it fertile and to guard it with care, but the earth itself turned into a curse for him. There has to be equilibrium between man and earth, and when the balance is disturbed, there will be serious repercussions.

As gardener of God, working in the garden and protecting it were joyful tasks for man. The Hebrew word “*Abad*” was used to denote farming. However, the Hebrew word, “*Asab*”, which was used to refer to working in the soil, means sadness, pain, toil, cry etc. In reality man had been downgraded to the state of a slave, as he was doing, not the work of a gardener, but the arduous work of a slave.

God warned man, “*Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field” Gen 3, 18).* This is a commentary on the contemporary situation and a warning to people about misuse of the earth

which is fast turning into a desert. Any question whether there would have been any thorns if man had not sinned, is irrelevant. Profound truths are conveyed in a story form and that too in the language of a farmer.

A Warning that is Relevant Always

We know of numerous cases where people work hard but do not earn enough to make both ends meet. To a large extent, wrongful actions of man have been responsible for loss of fertility of the soil and for ever-expanding deserts in the world.

Some time ago, chemical manure was introduced with the avowed purpose of “Greening the earth”, calling it *Green Revolution* but, sad to say, the process destroyed the soil to a considerable extent. Earth, water and air have become highly polluted. Water is drawn from the earth with the use of bore wells and earth grew dry, with the entire underground water getting depleted. Worse still, water sources themselves are contaminated. Even mighty rivers are not spared. They either go dry or are polluted to the extent that water became unusable. All these are results of reckless abuse of nature.

Oil, extracted from earth, is primarily used as fuel for vehicles and engines, the exhaust fumes of which pollute the entire atmosphere. The plastics, byproducts for the oil, have become a menace to environment, to earth, rivers and seas. Further, electronic waste also poses a threat to universe. Another threat to humanity is nuclear waste, and scientists have yet to find a way to dispose of it. All in all, humanity has landed itself in a crisis of unmatched proportions.

Environment is totally polluted by vehicles, factories and home cooling systems. In some cities, clean air is no

more available. In the near future, people may have to purchase clean air just as we procure bottled water. It is said that the O-Zone panels in the atmosphere have been ruptured, posing a serious threat to human existence as the function of those panels is to keep air clean and temperature stable and protect the earth from destructive cosmic rays.

We are witnessing, every passing day, systematic destruction of environment due to abuse of earth and air by humans. To a great extent, climate change is a direct offshoot of increasing levels of pollution in the air. Corona virus which has shaken the world is a warning, a kind of present-day version of curse. It is time that we paid heed to the signals and mended our ways.

Summary

Man is meant to be a blessing to earth. To be true to his calling, he should live in accordance with the will of God, honoring laws of nature and making earth a source of his livelihood. He has to refrain from any misuse of the soil. If man abuses nature, his work, which would otherwise be pleasant and sacred, akin to worship of God, would turn out to be arduous, like the forced labor of a slave.

Man is solely responsible for all his miseries. They are his own making because he rejected God, disobeyed His commandments and tried to become like God. The basic problem is that people have lost sight of who they truly were, their rightful place on earth and challenged the authority of God. Man is nothing but dust without the life-giving breath of God. It is God who made him and gave him the status of a child of God.

The sacred author presents this truth in a simple story form. People need to become aware of the destruction they

are causing to the earth. As the Lord God said through Prophet Joel, at least now we should become aware of our mistakes and make a complete return to the Lord.

Misuse of the earth was only one among many ways man rejected God. Far more serious offences are committed by some people, particularly when they hurt others grievously. Attention will be given to this subject next as earth is forced to open her mouth to drink innocent blood of her children.

6

Earth that drank the Blood

“What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (Gen 4, 10-12).

What does God intend to communicate to humanity through Covid -19 which has thrown the entire world into a state of panic? In fact, this book is an attempt at deciphering, to whatever extent possible, God’s message for us.

The first sin of man was rejection of God which made the earth a desert. We saw in Genesis, Chapter 3, that as man tried to become like God, he lost the Paradise which was the symbol of unity. Once man distanced himself from God, he ran into conflict with other persons. He was filled with feelings of shame and guilt. Nature turned against him. Earth changed into a desert producing weeds and thorns. However, this was just the beginning. Worse things were to follow.

Man, made of dust, was condemned to return to dust. In an attempt to overturn this judgment, man named his wife, “Eve”, ‘*hawah*’ in Hebrew, derived from the root “*ha-yah*”, “which means “to live”. “*The man called his wife’s*

name Eve, because she was the mother of all living” (Gen 3, 20). By explaining the meaning of the name, the aim of giving the name is made clear. Adam sought to overcome death through future generations. When one person dies, through “Eve” another would be born and thus human life would continue on earth.

Adam and Eve begot several children. The first child was a son, named Cain. The word Cain, derived from the root “*Qna*”, means “earn”. By choosing this name, Eve acknowledged that the child was a blessing of God. The second child was named “Abel”, which means fragile, transient and momentary, something that would disappear like the vapor. The children chose the type of work they liked. Cain chose farming while Abel chose shepherding.

According to Gen 4, it would seem that everything was moving smoothly. But the fact was, it was not so. Eve is seen as the main character in Chapter 3. It was she who named both the children. It is reported that earlier on it was she who engaged in a conversation with the Serpent, ate the forbidden fruit and gave it to her husband who also ate it. The sacred author projects Eve as more than an equal partner. She provides the leadership, whether for good or for evil, for better or for worse, and the man merely follows her.

Both the children of Eve were God fearing and devoted people and they offered sacrifices to God. This was their first duty, says the sacred author. Each one offered a portion of his products to God, Cain his agricultural products and Abel his sheep. However, through an unexpected turn of events, the course of history itself underwent a big change. Cain realized that God was pleased with and accepted Abel’s offerings while his offering was rejected. This enraged him. His heart was filled with jealousy and

hatred. Cain ignored that Abel was his brother and began to plot how to eliminate him.

“In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. (Gen 4, 3-5).

How did Cain conclude that his offering was rejected? No clear answer is given in the Bible. The account merely reports God’s response. *“So, Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell” (Gen 4, 5).* The original comment in Hebrew was that ‘his face turned down’. Looking down while interacting with someone was regarded as a sign of severing the relationship. Anger that is brewing in the heart is seen in the face. What was obvious was that Cain was filled with jealousy and hatred towards his brother.

Here is what the sacred author says as God’s own reaction, *“Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen 4, 6-7).*

The sacred author makes no mention of what wrong had been committed by Cain. But it is easily inferred that something improper had occurred. Moreover, what had been done is a pointer to much worse things to follow. The warning, “sin is couching at the door”, brings to mind the picture of the serpent in the Paradise. Jealousy and hatred growing in the heart are signs of a temptation. Cain must overcome it; otherwise the consequences could be serious.

Cain paid no heed to God’s warning, but proceeded with the plans he had drawn. He invited his brother to go with him to the field. After making sure that there was no

one around to see it, “*Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him*” (Gen 4, 8). Cain summarily got rid of Abel and possibly assumed that he did not need God’s blessing any more, as he had become the sole heir to everything in the world. He decided to live as he pleased and to do away with anyone who would dare oppose him. With such a mindset, Cain moved forward.

Cain and Abel offered sacrifices to God, in much the same way as priests would do. However, the sacrifice itself became the source of ill-will and jealousy between the two brothers. Cain’s offering had been rejected, not because of what was offered, but because of the attitude with which the offering was made. God asked of Cain, “*If you do well, will you not be accepted?*” There was something amiss about Cain’s attitude. He seemed to regard his brother as an enemy and a threat.

God is not one who showers His blessings based on what is offered. He reads our hearts and sees what we are offering. Jesus has said, “*If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift*” (Mt 5, 24).

God is the Father of us all. We are all brothers and sisters to one another. God desires close relationships among us, rooted in love (Psalm 133). However, Cain, even as he offers sacrifice to God, harbors enmity towards his brother out of jealousy. This is what led to his sacrifice being rejected. But Cain did not comprehend the situation. Nor did he pay heed to God’s own warning. He went ahead with his ill-conceived plan and killed his brother Abel. It did not take him long to realize that he had committed a heinous crime.

The voice of God thundered as if from the heavens above: *“Cain, where is your brother Abel?”* Incredulous as it may be, Cain responded in a defiant tone: *“I do not know, am I my brother’s keeper?”* He dared to challenge even God as if to say, “Who are you to question me?” But the Lord would not let the crime of Cain go unpunished.

“What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand” (Gen 4, 10-11).

A dreadful punishment! Pride of Cain was crushed to the ground. His presumption that no one would see his murderous act turned to be wrong. Bible teaches us clearly that one might be able to hide the body of the murdered, but not his blood. Blood signifies life and God is the Lord of life. The blood of the innocent victims of exploitation and oppression keep crying to God, which will not go in vain. God will surely respond to their cry and provide relief and justice.

God asked of Cain, “What have you done?” Cain was made to realize that he is not his own master, but he is subject to God to whom he is answerable for all his actions. Besides, the question from God is a reminder that nothing lies hidden from Him. The consequences of Cain’s action are frightful and far-reaching. *“Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand” (Gen 4, 11).*

The description of the earth opening its mouth to receive Abel’s blood is gruesome. Cain allowed himself to be led by Satan who *“was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him... he is a liar and the father of lies” (Jn 8,*

44). Many issues have become clearer, such as relationship between man and dust, the close bonds that should exist among people, the likely disaster in the event the relationship is broken, and finally, the fact that God would respond to these occurrences.

The story of Cain is engaging, though riddled with conflict. It shows how a conflict between two individuals could implicate the entire universe. Brother Abel's blood becomes a curse to Cain. The soil which is soaked with the blood of his brother has turned into a source of frustration and despair to the murderer. God said to Cain, "*When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth*" (Gen 4, 12). Though earth was not lost, it has become his enemy.

Cain was filled with fear that all those who see him would try to kill him. He felt that death would be preferable to living in such a situation. The story, however, does not end here.

God assured Cain, who was living in fear and dread that no one would dare to harm him. The LORD said to him, "*Not so! If anyone slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.*" *And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him*" (Gen 4, 15). The murderer is provided with God's protection! What a travesty of justice, one might be tempted to think.

Did God grant Cain the license to continue his murderous life? Far from it! Cain was punished, in fact condemned, to lead a life of a fugitive, to toil hard on an unresponsive soil, and to have no peace of mind. But God desired Cain's conversion of heart. Prophet Ezekiel echoes this truth, when he says that God does not desire the death of the sinner but his conversion: "*As I live, says the Lord*

GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways” (Ez 33, 11).

Cain Today

The story of “Cain and Abel” illustrates the kind of relationship people should develop with one another and how their relationship affects the universe. Cain the farmer and Abel the shepherd represent, in a manner of speaking, the entire humanity. This symbolism is strengthened by the very fact that Cain and Abel are portrayed as the sons of our first parents.

Farming and shepherding did become the basic occupations of humanity over a course of time. The sacred author is well aware of all these details, yet he wants to communicate the peculiarities of each character and through them the specific message God gives to every one of us. It is therefore important to pay attention to the message communicated through this metaphor of brotherhood, the murder of a brother and the response of God.

What was the reason for the sacrifice of Abel to be viewed favorably by God? How did Cain come to conclude that his offering did not find favor with God? Where did Cain acquire his wife from? Are these questions relevant to the story? Not at all! What is required is to discern the message that God desires to communicate to us through this elaborate account. That is what we are going to do next.

1. All the People are Brothers and Sisters

The very first lesson contained in the story is the message of universal brotherhood. All the people of the world are brothers and sisters to one another. This is a basic

teaching which needs our whole-hearted acceptance. The two occupations spoken of – farming and shepherding - are mere examples.

Relationships transcend caste, creed, status and work and, in the last analysis, we are all brothers and sisters to one another just as Cain and Abel were. Accordingly, there is little or no justification for engaging in any power struggle among us. We are called to accept, value and love each other and to co-operate with each other. Wealth is not to be accumulated but shared with those in need. This is the primary teaching of the Bible.

2. Corrupt Religious Practices

According to tradition, it is priests who offer sacrifices to God on behalf of people. Offering sacrifices and gifts to God is regarded as the prerogative of a religious person. By narrating that Cain and Abel too offered sacrifices to God, the sacred author has projected them as priests. What was the purpose of their sacrifices? This is not made clear.

But the sacred author does say that the sacrifice of one of them was acceptable to God while that of the other was not. Cain's offering did not find favor with God possibly because the offering was made with an unclean heart. He had nurtured feelings of jealousy and hatred toward his brother. This was easily recognizable from his subsequent actions.

That the first murder occurred in the context of a religious sacrifice is hard to believe. The hands of the first priest were stained with the blood of his own brother. This should awaken our mind and heart to much deeper and broader issues. Misplaced religious convictions lie behind the killing of millions of innocent people, which have taken

place throughout human history and continue still unabated. It cannot but be shocking to realize that the hands of the priest himself who professes to offer sacrifice to God are stained with human blood!

Fratricide by Cain, a priest, indicates that wars, genocides and terrorist attacks, are largely products of misguided religiosity, most unacceptable to God. Sacrifice offered by one who sees the other, not as a brother but as an enemy to be eliminated, is to be regarded as a sacrifice made, not to God, but to Satan, who is the father of lies and murderers (Jn 8, 45; 16, 2). We can say as well that Cain is an agent of Satan, and that is not his only title or trait.

3. The Earth that is Drank with Blood

The sacred author speaks of earth with utmost respect because earth is like a loving mother who nourishes all creatures to grow and to develop. Earth may also be referred to as soil or dust, because all creatures originate from dust, consume the products of soil for their nourishment and finally return to dust. Cain soaked this dust with the blood of his brother. He forced mother earth to drink the blood of her own beloved child. Can we fathom the depth of this assertion?

A mother is forced to drink the blood of her own son! The ugly face of atrocities man heaps on other people stands exposed. If we analyze the number of the dead during the various wars waged over the years, the picture that emerges can be deeply shocking. Besides wars, other events and atrocities like revolutions, slave trade, organ trafficking, famine etc. have also contributed to the miseries of man. All this would reveal the true face of Cain. Given below are a few examples of wars and revolutions, collected from various sources.

3. a. Wars - Revolutions

No.	War – Revolution	The parties involved	Year	Death toll
1	War - Cyrus	Persia & the Mediterranean countries	B.C. 543-530	2 Lakhs
2.	Alexander	Macedonia & other countries	B.C. 336-323	2 Lakhs
3.	Punic war	Rome Vs. Carthaginian Empire	B.C. 264-146	30 Lakhs
4.	Kalinga war	Mauya Empire Vs. Kalinga Empire	B.C. 262-261	4 Lakhs
5.	Gallic War	Rome V.s Gallia	B.C. 58-50	10 Lakhs
6.	Jewish wars	Rome Vs. Jews	A.D. 66 - 136	55 Lakhs
7.	Three Kingdoms War	China	A.D. 184-280	7. 6 Crores
8.	Yellow Turban Mutiny	China	A.D. 184-205	1 Crore
9	Moorish wars	Moors Vs. Byzantine Empire	A.D. 534-548	50 Lakhs
10	Reconquista	Spain& Portugal Vs. Muslims	A.D. 711-1492	70 Lakhs
11	Anlusian Rebellion	China	A.D. 755- 763	4 Crores
12	Crusades	Christians Vs. Muslims	A.D.1095-1291	40 Lakhs
13	Mongol Conquest	Mongolia Vs. Eurasian States	A.D. 1206-1318	7 Crores
14	Conquest of Timur	Timurid Empire Vs. middle eastern states	A.D. 1370-1405	1 Crore
15	Spanish Conquest	Spain Vs. Aztec Empire	A.D. 1519-1632	3.5 Crores
16	French Wars of Religion	Protestants Vs. Catholics	A.D. 1562-1584	60 Lakhs
17	Japanese Invasion of Korea	Japan Vs. Korea	A.D. 1592-1598	10 Lakhs
18	Chinese revolution	China	A.D. 1616-1683	2.5 Crores

19	Mughal Maratha wars	India	A.D. 1658-1707	50 Lakhs
20	Napoleonic Wars	Europe	A.D. 1803-1815	1.1 Crores
21	Thai Ping Rebellion	China	A.D. 1850-1866	12 Crores
22	Sepoy Mutiny	India	A.D. 1857-1858	18 Lakhs
23	World War I	World	A.D. 1914-1918	4.5 Crores
24	October Revolution	Russia	A.D. 1917-1922	1.4 Cores
25	Chinese Civil War	China	A.D. 1927-1948	2 Cores
26	China - Japan	China Vs. Japan	A.D. 1937-1945	4.5 Cores
27	World War II	World	A.D. 1939-1945	14 Cores
28	Korean War	S. Korea Vs. North Korea; allies	A.D. 1950-1953	50 Lakhs
29	Vietnam War	S. Vietnam Vs. N. Vietnam; allies	A.D. 1955-1975	70 Lakhs
30	Nigerian Civil War	Nigeria	A.D. 1967-1970	40 Lakhs
31	Afghanistan war	Afghanistan Vs. Rebels	A.D. 1978-2020	33 Lakhs
32	2 nd Congo War	Congo Vs. Rebels	A.D. 1998-2003	80 Lakhs

We can gain a rough idea about the cruelty of man against man from the number of deaths quoted in the list. The wars were of various kinds. For example, if someone were to feel that he does not have enough, he would try to seize it from someone who has it. It could be anything like food, ornaments, or land. What starts as a small conflict may end in a full-scale war.

Likewise, if anyone were to regard the other as an

enemy, he will be tempted to eliminate him and to usurp whatever belongs to him. Similarly, when someone is attacked, he is bound to retaliate, and this can lead to death and destruction on both sides. From the data quoted in the list it is apparent that greed and enmity among people are actually on the increase and so also the number of resultant casualties.

Crores of people are facing starvation. However, governments, instead of producing food for them, are busy creating border disputes and accumulating weapons of mass destruction. The conflict between India and China is an apt example of this phenomenon. In this case, who is Cain and who is Abel? Difficult to say. The end result is that mother earth is forced to drink the blood of her own children, because in the final analysis, all are her children, whether they are Indians, Chinese or Pakistanis.

The moot question is whether wars result from putting up resistance to the enemy or also out of greed to expand one's territory. In such a case, there are likely to be attacks and counter attacks, and blood of people on both sides will be spilt sullyng the soil.

Conflicts occur not only between countries but also within a country, among different sections and interest groups. The oppressed try to break free from the oppression inflicted on them. This could be an independence movement, a mutiny or a revolution of some kind.

The French revolution, the October revolution of Russia and the popular protests in China and in many other parts of the world are a few illustrations, all of which resulted in bloodshed. Every revolution is generally followed by a war which involves more bloodshed. This is just one of the many faces of Cain. More of his ugly faces are to be exposed.

3. b. Slave Markets

Slave trade is as old as humanity itself. The strong subdue the weak and use them the way they choose. The first mention of slavery in the Bible is found in connection with an incident involving Noah after the great flood. Noah was the only just man found in the entire world before the devastation wrought by the flood. After the great flood, Noah planted a vineyard and produced grapes from which he made wine.

Once he got drunk, fell into sleep and was lying in his tent fully naked. Ham, one of Noah's sons and the father of Canaan, happened to see his father lying naked and informed his brothers who rushed quickly and covered him with clothes. On waking up, Noah learnt of whatever had happened. He was furious and cursed his son Ham saying, "*Cursed be Canaan; he will be a slave to his brothers*".

Noah also said, "*Give praise to the Lord, the God of Shem! Canaan will be the slave of Shem. May God cause Japheth to increase! May his descendants live with the people of Shem! Canaan will be the slave of Japheth*" (Gen 9, 25-27).

There are many more references to slavery in the Bible. From these one may be inclined to conclude that God approves of slavery. In fact, the Bible contains exhortations which state that masters should be kind to slaves and they should grant them freedom during the Jubilee year.

Some Christians as well believe that slavery is perfectly legitimate. They seem to forget that hearing the cry of the oppressed slaves, which is what the Jews were in Egypt, God came down and revealed Himself to Moses with the name "Yahweh" and commanded him to act as His instrument in liberating the Jews from the slavery of Egyptians.

The first commandment, the basis for all the commandments, prohibits slavery. God introduced Himself, *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage”* (Ex 20, 2).

There were innumerable slaves in Egypt and it was their hard work, sweat and blood that made the country rich and prosperous. There were several different types of slaves. The longstanding custom was to enslave the entire population of a defeated country. This served as the main source of the slave market. Some were forced to serve as slaves because they could not pay off the debts they had incurred. There is a mention about it in the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt 18, 21- 35).

Almost all countries in the world had slaves and slave markets, in one form or other. However, Black people of Africa were the worst victims of slavery and they have suffered more than any other community. Muslims from Arabia captured African nations during 900 – 1900 A.D., took more than four crores of people, deported them to various markets in Europe and America and auctioned them out as slaves.

Slaves were transported to other countries through ships that sailed through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Some were moved on foot through the Sahara Desert. Several millions more of the Black community were also turned into slaves and sold to South and North American continents.

Slavery in America was started by Portuguese who entered into a treaty with East African countries in 1494. Several other European countries followed suit, such as Spain, England, France etc. who also involved themselves actively in the slave trade. Black people from African forests

were captured and were then sold as slaves. They were taken by ship to the Americas to be put on sale in the slave markets. Slave camps were set up in all ports to house slaves temporarily. Many would perish between the camps and the ships. Those who survived would live and serve as slaves for generations.

Slave markets were active until the beginning of the 19th century. According to the website <http://www.worldfuturefund.org>, more than six crores people were victims of slave trade. Nobody knows the number of people who suffered untimely death as slaves were captured from remote regions of Africa and were then sold away in the slave markets. Thereafter, they were made to toil hard amidst inhuman conditions and to suffer untold hardships.

Shockingly, many Christians and Evangelists were involved in slave trade. They cited the curse Noah had pronounced on Ham to justify their support to slavery. It was argued that Black people of Africa were descendants of Ham and they were living out the curse of Noah. We are left to wonder whose Gospel they were preaching, whether it was of Jesus Christ or of Satan.

Even Catholic countries such as Portugal and Spain were involved in slave trade, nay they were in the forefront. Wealth accumulated through slave trade and hard labor of slaves was taken to Europe to construct beautiful churches. Interestingly, today many of the churches in Europe have fallen into disuse and have been converted into museums. Could it be seen as the response of God to the cruel and unholy culture slave trade?

Pope Francis has bemoaned why the Church took so much time to condemn slavery (Fratelli Tutti § 86). Pope's lament shows that no one can absolve himself of the sin of

having exploited helpless fellow human beings. Our hands are stained with the blood of our neighbor. Cain still lives on among us as a strong evil force, and is easily recognizable in those who are responsible for the death of innocent people.

3c. Invasion – Immigration – Genocide

There have always been wars waged to conquer other nations, but what people of Europe did in the 16th and the 17th centuries is very unique and different. Voyages were undertaken to discover new lands and new continents. Among these initiatives, what would count as the most important is the voyage made by Christopher Columbus on 3 August 1492 with the blessing of the royal family of Spain. He started the voyage with three ships and after two months, on 12 October, he reached the island of Bahamas.

This marked the beginning of a new era of Colonialism which involved taking over control of the newly-discovered countries by the Europeans. Thinking he had landed in India, Columbus regarded the native people there as Indians. Subsequently they were referred to as “Red Indians”, mainly because of the color of their skin.

Following the example of Spain, other European countries, such as Portugal, England, France, Germany and Denmark travelled to many countries in the East and West in the name of business. They involved themselves in the local politics and gradually began to take control of portions of the country and eventually of the entire country itself. It cannot be categorically stated that colonialism has ended completely in the world. Nobody knows the number of people who were killed as result of colonial occupation.

Invading forces tried to subjugate local people. Those who opposed the colonial power or their onward march

were summarily killed. Native people who submitted to colonial rulers were made slaves and were engaged to work in their estates and mines. They were not paid any wages, but were just provided with minimum food and limited facilities. People fell easy prey to outbreak of contagious diseases such as cholera and small pox and innumerable lives were lost.

There were rumors that viruses were purposely imported from Europe. Local people were given blankets which were contaminated by viruses of small pox, and consequently many died of the disease.

Not all these accusations could be held as valid but there is ample proof that cruelties were heaped on local people. Spain captured Mexico in 1521, which then had a population of 5 crores. After a hundred years, the population plummeted to 80 Lakhs. We can only guess what the cause could be for this dramatic decrease in population.

Similarly, North America had a population of 14crores in 1491. After 200 years in 1691, the figure was a mere 1.5crore. Eliminating local people was an official policy of colonizers. In order to exterminate the locals, the colonizers paid a reward of 40 pounds for the head of a male and 20 pounds for the head of a female. This was in 1755. For work in the field, Black people from Africa were found to be far more useful than local Red Indians. Besides, colonial rulers executed their projects of eliminating people in an area or of a tribe systematically.

As a result of this organized annihilation, in North America where there were crores of Red Indians, only a few thousand of them are left today. In South America, the number of surviving Red Indians is slightly larger. Destruction wrought by colonizers on the local population

is incalculable and the damage immeasurable. While these atrocities were being perpetrated, leaders of Christian Churches not only maintained stoic silence but even provided tacit support to such measures. It is really difficult to understand how such an attitude was allowed to get by.

It is shocking to realize that in the past one century more than 20 crores of innocent and helpless people were brutally murdered for various reasons. In the matter of eliminating people of a specific community, Hitler would feature high up in the ranks; in fact he would be the very first in the list. Under his leadership, between 1933 and 1946, 3 crores people were put to death. Of whom, Jews alone accounted for 60 lakhs. Two third of the Jews who lived in Europe were eliminated. Actually, Hitler's intention was to get rid of all Jews. Aside from Jews, he also planned to do away with all people who could be a burden on the society such as the handicapped, the elderly and those afflicted with incurable diseases, and ultimately all those who did not belong to Aryan race.

Extermination of a particular community was not a phenomenon peculiar to last century. Even today thousands are being killed in the name of religion and politics. The list of offenders includes Islamic State terrorists in the Middle East, Bochco Haram radicals in Africa, numerous other Islamic terrorists in other parts of the world, the growing number of religious fanatics in India, political terrorists such as Maoists, and Buddhists, who profess non-violence as their core religious tenet, but are involved in mass-killing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

The list of terrorists knows no end. Terrorism of this nature has turned the entire world into a war zone. The daily news bulletin gives the impression that whole world is engaged in a dreadful warfare though no World War as

such has been declared. Is that all? This is not the end of our narration about cruelty of man which forces mother earth to drink the blood of her own children.

3. d. Human Trafficking

There is no use in lamenting over slave trade of the past. Nothing can be undone. What is far more worrying and serious is the matter of human trafficking being carried out today. Narratives in the internet - <https://www.safehorizon.org/human-trafficking-statistics-facts> - are very worrisome. The article defines and explains the aim of human trafficking. Human trafficking is the practice of exploiting adults and children and using them as commodities, or objects, in conditions of sexual and labor servitude. Their modus operandi is as follows:

- a) The victims are promised huge financial benefits but are paid nothing finally.
- b) Once the victims agree, their passports and other documents are taken by the agents.
- c) The victims are threatened and are subjected to physical and mental torture.
- d) To regain their freedom, the victims will have to pay huge sums of money.

The victims are made to live in inhuman conditions and are provided with limited facilities. Their workplace is made their living space. There may not be electricity, running water, or heating arrangements. The little place may have to be shared with several others. The victims will be subjected to hard work in homes, industrial areas,

constructions sites, cocktail bars and some as sex workers with little or no remuneration. Hard work apart, they will be subjected to severe mental and physical torture, while being denied freedom to converse with anyone else. However, they are carefully tutored as to how to respond to Police and other such investigators.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has 187 countries as its members. According to the published data in 2017, there are more than 25 crore individuals, who are victims of human trafficking. The traffickers would pretend to be lovers and even marry the girls in some cases, and lure them promising them good jobs with attractive salaries. They will then be taken to big cities and sold there either as slaves or as prostitutes. Besides girls, even boys and adults get trapped in this deceitful business.

According to estimation done in 2017, there are more than 38 lakh adults and 10 lakh youths working as sex workers in different parts of the world. This is yet another face of Cain, but we are not done with the story of man's cruelty against fellowmen.

3.e. Business of human organs

In the world of commerce, a new item has found its way to the shelf of items on sale. We are referring to sale of human organs. This new business began with the success of organ transplant surgery. Demand for human organs is on the increase with this new medical innovation. There are people who donate organs or give consent for removal of organs of a dead person soon after death. There are also persons who are willing to sell their organs because of financial considerations.

Beyond these legal avenues, there are people in the medical fraternity who remove organs without the

knowledge of the persons and sell them for high price in the black market. In the website, <https://www.acamstudy.org/organ-trafficking-the-unseen-form-of-human-trafficking>, shocking details have been reported. According to the WHO notification in 2018, more than 10,000 kidneys are sold annually in the black market. The rates charged for different organs are listed below:

Cornea	-	\$ 30,000.00
Lung	-	\$ 150,000.00
Liver	-	\$ 98,000.00
Kidney	-	\$ 62,000.00

Human organ business in the black market is estimated to be about \$1.7 billion annually. The purchasers of organs are mostly the rich from America and other Western countries, while people who willingly sell their organs or who get cheated of their organs by the unscrupulous elements, are the poor and the ordinary people. Victims of human trafficking end up losing their inner organs, especially the sex workers.

Even in Kerala, it is heard, super specialty hospitals are involved in the racket of removing inner organs of people surreptitiously. Everyone has become greedy and people are willing to do anything, even if it involves inflicting cruelty and injustice, to make money. Not seldom, patients undergoing major surgery lose their life on the operation table. Their inner organs are removed in a clandestine manner and sold in the black market. People do not always carry out checks on a dead body and so missing organs are not noticed.

Doctors and hospitals, ostensibly committed to serving and saving lives turn into partners in crime, in the mold of Cain! We are not through yet with accounts of the misdeeds of man. There is still another face of Cain which is widely seen in abortion clinics.

3.f. Abortion

Abortion means killing an unborn child in the womb of the mother. This is generally done with the assistance of medical personnel, and is termed as Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP). It is in itself an act of murder, but is rationalized as a form of medical treatment. Some women regard it as their right to terminate their pregnancy at any time. The issue was discussed in detail in 1994 in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and it was declared that each person has the right to decide when to have a child and how old a child should be before the birth of the next one

As of today, abortion has been made legal in almost all the countries of the world. The reference is not to surgery required to save the life of the mother or the baby. We are speaking about blanket approval granted by the governments to terminate a pregnancy for the convenience of the mother. Initially, abortion was permitted only up to a maximum of three months of pregnancy but now the period has been extended up to six months. Laws which allow termination of pregnancy have been passed by many governments on the pretext that it is the right of a woman to end an unwanted pregnancy.

According to World Health Organization, one third of all children conceived are killed in the womb. As such, about 5 crores children are aborted every year. This is also reported in the website [https://w.w.w. who](https://w.w.w.who). Health topics

– Abortion. Nearly 125,000 children are murdered in the womb every day and that works out to be two children every second. Nobody seems to care much about the countless children being killed through abortion.

A mother is expected to provide a child with love and care and ensure its growth and safety in her womb; whereas, abortion amounts to the same mother handing over the child to be killed. It is impossible to believe, but it is true, that the number of abortions in the world, every year, total up to more than double the population of Kerala. Our conscience has become so numb that we have ceased to care about the number of children being killed in the womb of mothers, which ironically should be the safest place for a growing baby.

St. John Paul II published an encyclical, *EVANGELIUM VITAE*, on 25 March 1995. The encyclical highlighted the threats against human life, particularly abortion at the commencement of life and mercy killing or euthanasia towards the end of life, and condemned them in no uncertain terms.

The Pope referred to those who carry out abortion and euthanasia procedures as the “Modern-day Herods and Pharaohs”. His concern was that those entrusted with the task of protecting life at its most vulnerable stages are themselves in the forefront, busy eliminating it. God will certainly respond to the cry of the innocent blood.

We have also to be concerned about killings taking place in the name of Euthanasia. Some people, especially in the developed countries, have taken a position that a person has a right to decide when to die and how to die. Euthanasia has been legalized in several countries. The problem is that the scope for abuse is enormous. People, especially relatives, may decide to terminate the

life of persons whom they view as a burden. They can do so without the knowledge and the consent of the person concerned.

Euthanasia is a Greek word, which means “Good death”. Euthanasia may also be regarded as assisted suicide. No matter how it is termed, it seems to be plain murder. The number of people eliminated by way of Euthanasia is not available.

Summary

There are very many other places from where the cry of the blood rises to God. Encroachment by foreigners, colonial rule, exploitation of various types, evacuation of the native people from their land in the name of development, people dying of starvation, mutilated human lives and many more similar cases deserve our attention.

More than 85 crore people are struggling for at least one meal a day. There is no shortage of food in the world. What the earth yields is more than adequate to meet the needs of all people. But, are we aware that one third of the food produced is destroyed in order to maintain their price high! Some leave the soil uncultivated. In some other cases, more importance is given to cash products rather than to food products. The lands, where in the past, rice and wheat were grown, are being used under the pretext of manufacturing oil for natural gas in place of Petrol.

The Earth soaked with the blood of the oppressed people cries out to God. This cry would not go in vain. God would certainly respond to the cries of His people. Is the pandemic, Covid-19, a part of God’s scheme of things, to send out a message to us? Maybe. The question “Where is your brother?” must reverberate in the four corners of the

earth, resound in all our hearts and must be heard by all the persons. Everyone should realize that God will not let matters to continue in this fashion.

The murder of Abel and the cry of his blood do not mark the end of the lessons in the Bible. This is only a beginning. There are more lessons to be learnt from the Great Flood which devastated the whole earth.

God's Sorrow

“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them” (Gen 6, 5-7).

Behaviour and actions of man, particularly if they are contrary to the Will of God, His rules and regulations, impact the entire universe. The Biblical citation from the Book of Genesis conveys a note of regret on the part of God to have created man on earth. What can be the ramifications of man's utter failure to live up to God's expectations, on the humanity at large!

Is God a Merciless Judge?

The Book of Genesis, Chapters 3-4, might give the impression that God executes justice without mercy. This is far from the truth. On the contrary, God was filled with sadness at the perfidy and the wickedness of man. This is seen in three different verses of the Bible, conveyed in three different ways.

The first comment is that God regretted making man; the second that His heart was pained at witnessing man's

wickedness; and the third, that He grew sad about the various happenings. What gave rise to such an anguish? What will God do next? These questions are extremely important and they require answers.

Literary form

The verses quoted above are from the Yahwist source where deep truths and insights are communicated in a story form. God is invisible and is beyond human comprehension. But He is not an unfeeling power who stays far away from man. God is a loving Father. He loves man and all His other creatures including the universe and desires only the best for them all. Whatever they require is provided to them.

The Biblical passage expresses the pain of a Father who laments over his children, seeing them straying away from the right path. It is the sin of man and its rapid spread in the whole universe which is causing all the sorrow and anguish to God.

Growing Sin

What Adam started, his children continued. Cain killed his brother. *“Lamech said to his wives: ... I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-seven-fold”* (Gen 4, 23-24). Sin had exceeded all limits very quickly, as reported in Gen 6. The forbidden marriage mentioned in Chapter 6, 1-3 is only an illustration. *“The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose”* (Gen 6, 2). Who are the sons of God? Who are the daughters of men? There are three different possible interpretations.

According to the first interpretation, the sons of God

are the fallen angels. A group of angels, under the leadership of “Assasel”, attracted by the beauty of women, assumed human form and came down to the earth, married whomsoever they desired and begot children who were the mighty men mentioned in Gen 6, 4. They violated all the norms imposed by God. This would then be the presentation of the climax of sin.

The second interpretation is that the sons of God are the men of Israel, and the daughters of men the women of Canaan. Entering into sexual relationship with Gentile women was the main cause of Israel’s infidelity to God, because through this relationship they were drawn to worship Baal and the other gods of the Canaanites, thus breaking the covenant with God. Some scholars say that this forbidden marriage is a mythical representation of a true, historical event.

The third explanation holds that the sons of God are powerful leaders and kings such as Pharaoh, who tried to have immoral relationship with the wife of Abraham, and King David who took on Bathsheba, wife of Uriah., and Solomon who had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1Kgs 11,3). The daughters of men were the women they desired.

It is not necessary that we accept any one of these explanations exclusively. All the three are real possibilities. The sacred author was pointing to the forbidden relationship between man and woman. With such relationships, the family bonds are destroyed. Violating the norms and the restrictions God had established would lead to undesirable consequences.

The wickedness of man has increased on earth because his focus and imagination are turned on evil matters. This phenomenon should be seen in the light of the Biblical

assertion, “*God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good*” (Gen 1, 31). From the situation that “all was good”, how did the universe slide down to today’s unholy condition? It has happened gradually, by man’s evil deeds. In particular, man has erected walls between himself and his fellowmen.

The list of man’s misadventures is long and grisly. The misguided ambition to become like God, extreme jealousy towards the brother, culminating in his murder, Lamech’s sexual perversions and feelings of revenge which exceeded all limits, and several other misdeeds, incurred God’s wrath and punishment. It would seem that man’s surrender to Satan was complete and he became wholly, body and soul, under the dominion of sin.

God’s Response

How did God respond to all these unsavoury acts of man? As we know, the Yahwist source employs a literary style which ascribes human emotions to God. Man’s infidelity evokes in God not anger but pain and sadness. God regards us all as His children. The picture of God we have from the Bible is that of a Father, and a mother, who laments over her children because they are found harming and ruining themselves.

God decides to destroy everything on earth, plants, trees, animals and man (Gen 6,7). This is a clear indication, and also a message to man, that man’s actions impact not only his own fortunes and those of his fellowmen, but the fate of the entire universe. God had installed man as His agent and a caretaker of the earth, but man steered everything to ruin, slowly and steadily. Everything now is in disarray, man’s relationship with God, his relationship with fellowmen and his relationship with the universe.

The Great Flood

God decides to send a great flood to destroy the earth. Soon the water levels rose 15 feet above the tallest of the mountains. All the earth lay buried beneath the waters (Gen 7, 20). From where did so much water descend on the earth?

Two sources are cited in the Bible. The first cause was the non-stop, torrential rain for forty days. The other cause, somewhat disquieting, alludes to is this. *“On the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened”* (Gen 7,11). The message conveyed is simple. Man’s ill-conceived actions have resulted in the collapse of the structures God had created to contain the waters in the sky above and the earth below.

The Responsibility of Man

The theological insight which can be gained from the story of the Great Flood is unnerving and far-reaching. The continued existence and wellbeing of the universe, which is entirely dependent on God’s mercy, are closely related to man’s adherence to God’s commands. If man were to violate laws and restrictions set by God, the fate of the universe itself will be in jeopardy. It is not God’s punishment, but man’s own doing, a misfortune brought on himself and the universe by his selfishness and wilful neglect of Divine regulations. This is the main lesson contained in the Biblical account of the Great Flood.

Even while the whole world had grown vile and corrupt, one man stood apart from the rest. *“But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD”* (Gen 6, 8). Salvation History advances through people who refuse to follow the majority

view as the norm for their own life. *“Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God”* (Gen 6, 9). This view has great significance to our own times as it had at the time of the Great Flood.

Examples of people who chose to walk with God despite societal pressures to act otherwise abound in the Bible. Abraham, Moses, Samuel and Jeremiah, are just a few examples to mention. We have the duty to follow the right path at all costs and at all times, rather than just move with the crowd. It was for this purpose that God has instituted the Commandments.

Relevance Today

The Great Flood put out a strong warning that man’s wrong decisions would have an adverse impact on the universe as a whole. We are suffering today, more than ever, the consequences of man’s erroneous, flawed decisions. Rain forests and trees are like the lungs of the earth. Trees produce the oxygen needed for humans and other creatures, by converting poisonous air into life-sustaining air. But, sadly, over the past several decades, destruction of rain forests and trees is being carried out at a frenzied pace in the name of industrialization, without any regard to environment.

Industries emit poisonous gas while vehicles on the roads and vessels in the water cause severe air pollution. Ozone layers which prevent the deadly cosmic rays from entering the atmosphere have been ruptured; with the result the threat of atmospheric degradation is looming large on the horizon.

As a result of global warming, glaciers in the Northern pole are melting. Ice on top of great mountains like Himalayas and Alps are melting too due to rise in temperature. Tsunamis are swallowing up cities and sea coasts.

Flood waters engulfed the entire world and washed away the blood stains left over on the face of the earth by the cruel deeds of man. Biblical description of the Flood presents a gruesome picture. So much so, God resolves not to destroy the earth by flood again (Gen 8, 21). However, God's decision is not to be construed as a license to do anything we please, as in the days past. God is fully aware of man's weakness and his inclination to go in evil ways. God loves and accepts man as he is, sinful though he may be, and He is even willing to enter into a Covenant with him.

Covenants

Of the many Covenants God made with man, the first one was the Covenant with Noah. It was a Cosmic Covenant as it encompassed the entire universe (Gen 9, 1-7). Even though man is assured of God's protection, he is not free of his duties and responsibilities. *"Your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; of every beast I will require it and of man; of every man's brother I will require the life of man"* (Gen 9, 5). This is not to be taken literally but as a warning against any form of injustice.

Warnings

We are not to lose sight of the two warnings contained in the Great Flood: a) Man's sin and wickedness impact the entire universe and they are likely to cause great harm. b) The evil in the hearts of people cause great pain to God because God is a loving Father, and not an indifferent tyrant. We must not cause hurt to God, by our thoughts, words and actions, or make Him regret to have created us.

Everyone on earth has a propensity to evil. However, one should bear in mind that even when all others were

under the dominion of sin, Noah stayed pure and clean, and thereby salvation history could continue without any hitch. Basing our life on the majority view or predilections will not help us to lead a life of virtue. God is the Lord of the universe. His precepts should be the basis for our laws and the norms for our behaviour. God is the ultimate source of life itself.

RAIN OF FIRE

“The LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground” (Gen 19, 24-25).

The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah serve as warning signals in the Salvation history. The rain of fire that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah should remind us of what could befall us if we continue our evil ways, ignoring Divine injunctions to lead a virtuous life. Sodom and Gomorrah find frequent mention, more than fifty times, in the Biblical books from Genesis to Revelation, as illustration of unlawful conduct, which can invite death and destruction.

The Fall of Noah

Earth was washed clean by the Great Flood. Hope and joy were revived following the assurance that life on earth would continue for ever. Mindful of man’s propensity to evil, the Cosmic Covenant extended protection to all creation. The rainbow was installed to serve as a sign of Divine tutelage. Even when all others had fallen into evil ways, Noah had remained just and steadfast. Thanks to his virtue, humanity was given a new lease of life. But alas, Noah, the holy man, faltered and fell, and got implicated in a shameful incident.

Not long after the Great Flood, one day Noah consumed wine, made from the produce of his own vineyard. Unfortunately, he became heavily drunk, and in his drunken stupor, lay totally naked in his tent. His second son Ham happened to pass that way. He felt ashamed and alerted his brothers, who rushed to the scene and covered him with clothes. When Noah came to hear of what had transpired, he was furious with Ham and hurled curses on him. What for? After all, it was he who had got himself into an embarrassing situation. What emerges from the story is that liquor can cause harm and that man, by nature, is prone to sinfulness.

Everything on earth was destroyed in the Great Flood except man's love for evil. For no good reason, Noah curses Ham to be a slave to his own brothers (Gen 29, 25-28). The story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11, 1-9) is also a proof of man's fondness for wrong-doings. Those who tried to become equal to God by building a tower that reaches up to heaven the abode of God, found themselves scattered around the world, speaking in different tongues, and unable to relate to each other. It was God's way of teaching them a lesson.

The Selfishness of Lot

God chose Abraham to unite all his people who were straying away from Him and from one another. Towards this purpose, God guided Abraham, giving him promises and teaching him the Commandments.

In this big history, suddenly Lot, brother of Abraham, makes his appearance. The rain of fire is an event associated with Lot. Sensing that a conflict is developing between him and his brother Lot, Abraham suggests that they part ways and settle down separately, far away from each other.

Their land was divided into two portions and Abraham lets Lot choose the portion he likes. Taking full advantage of the generosity shown by his brother, Lot chose the better portion, the fertile plane of Jordan (Gen 13, 1-13).

Here is the background to their story. Abraham and Lot travelled together far until they earned much wealth. With growth in wealth, other problems began to show their ugly heads. Abraham decided that conflict among their shepherds must not be allowed to damage the relationship between the brothers. Only Abraham had received the call to leave Harran. Lot merely followed him.

Lot gave no thought to the fact that he was able to accumulate so much wealth only because of his brother Abraham. Making use of the opportunity he was given, Lot took away the better portion of the property. He settled down in the suburb of a city. *“Lot dwelt among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD”* (Gen 13, 12-13).

Later on, when Abraham heard that Lot had been taken captive by the kings, he rushed to the site with his servants and liberated Lot (Gen 14, 1-16). Abraham risked his life to save his brother from the hands of his enemies. But Lot learned nothing from all these experiences and he continued to live in the city. It is in this connection that the sacred author presents the story of the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. People in the city of Sodom were wicked. The Lord revealed to Abraham the reason behind destroying the two cities.

Aim of the Rain of Fire

God appeared to Abraham first in the form of three Angels, but subsequently as a single person. Soliloquy of

God details the sin of Sodom and lessons contained in the punishment. Abraham was called to be the Father of a great nation. He would be the source of blessing for all people in the world. God has revealed how this would happen.

“I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen 18, 19).

Obedying the Lord and walking in His path means practising righteousness and justice. The consequences for failing to do so have been clearly demonstrated through the destruction of Sodom.

“Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know” (Gen 18, 20-21).

The Cry of those who were denied Justice

The Hebrew word “*Se’aqā*” is translated as “Cry”. “*Se’aqā*” is similar to the word “*Sedaqa*”, which means justice. What is conveyed is that the cries of the ones who were denied justice are reaching up to God, just as the blood shed by Cain did. The cries rise to the Lord who is the source of life and the One who executes justice for all creatures. He would listen to those cries; He would respond to them and execute justice punishing those who denied justice to the poor and the needy. This is what the sacred author communicates through the destruction of Sodom. What was the sin of Sodom, anyway?

The Sin of Sodom

There is a consensus that the sin of Sodom was sexual orientation known as gay or lesbian, or LGBT. Two men arrived at the house of Lot as strangers to spend the night there. The entire town descended on the scene and demanded that the two be handed over to them for sexual indulgence. This incident is produced as proof of the city's perverse sexual orientation. It is this incident which gave rise to the word "Sodomy" to refer to homosexual relationships. But, was this the only sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? There is evidence to believe that there was more to it than this single aberration.

No doubt, deviant sexual behaviour of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah was part of the issue. What else then contributed to the moral crisis? None of the city dwellers was willing to provide shelter to the strangers. *"This fellow came to sojourn, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them. Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and drew near to break the door"* (Gen 19, 9). Clearly, refusing to accommodate strangers and troubling the helpless were also part of their transgressions. This is not the end of the story.

The name Sodom was associated with all forms of wickedness. Prophets tended to compare the unjust leaders of Israel with the delinquent people of Sodom. Isaiah in particular cried out in anguish, bemoaning the abysmal levels to which the people of Sodom and Gomorrah had descended.

"Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.... If the LORD of hosts

had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah. Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!” (Is 1, 4-10).

Prophet Jeremiah had still harsher things to say about Sodom and Gomorrah. *“In the prophets of Jerusalem, I have seen a horrible thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his wickedness; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah” (Jer 23, 14).*

Prophet Ezekiel spoke pointedly against the infidelity of Jerusalem. He pictures the Northern kingdom, Israel as the sister of the Southern kingdom, Judah, which lays bare the sin of Sodom. *“Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy... therefore I removed them, when I saw it” (Ez 16, 49-50).*

The cry against Sodom originated from injustice, wickedness, exploitation and persecution of the poor, refusal to provide justice to them, and blatant violation of God’s commandments governing their relationship with others. It was not sexual aberration alone but they were also guilty of several other transgressions. They failed to live by the Ten Commandments and, as a result, they made the life of the poor, the orphans and the helpless utterly miserable. This was the provocation to the cry that rose to the Lord.

Punishment meted out to Sodom and Gomorrah is a clear lesson that denial of justice to the helpless is a very serious offence. Descendants of Abraham will do well to wake up to this truth and resolve to walk the path of truth and justice. The purpose of the soliloquy of God was precisely to teach everybody about the evils of injustice.

Mediation

Abraham's prayer of intercession deserves special attention (Gen 18, 22-32). It is stated that before the start of prayer, Abraham stood before the Lord. There was first mediation and then it turned into a negotiation between God and Abraham. The talk began with figure fifty and ended up with figure ten. But even figure ten proved an unachievable target. There were not even ten just men in the whole of Sodom and Gomorrah. This story illustrates that as the evil in one could cause the fall of another, so also the goodness in one can help to save another.

The nature and aim of Punishment

There are several different views about destruction of Sodom. One theory is that there was a volcanic eruption. Another view is that destruction was wrought by an asteroid from the sky. A third version is that destruction was the result of an earthquake. Even if there are divergent views about the cause of destruction, there is no disagreement about the fact that destruction was meant to serve as a punishment.

Violation of God's Commandments impacts all life on earth adversely, just as the Great Flood wiped out all creatures in the world. In this event, fire is shown as an instrument of punishment. Fire, however, did not consume the entire world but only the cities on which it had fallen. The cities were reduced to ashes. The sacred author's comment that it is "*The Valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea)*" (Gen 14, 3), provides clarity to the situation. There can be little doubt that sinful life of man impacts the universe and destroys the abodes of creatures.

Volcanic eruptions, occurrence of tsunamis and violent

earth- quakes could not be regarded as punishment to the sins of people. Nor can Sodom be held responsible for all natural calamities. However, we cannot ignore the warning signals in these frightful events. Moreover, these incidents can escalate into major catastrophes.

Do not Look Back

All of God's warnings conveyed to Lot and his wife had fallen on deaf ears. Angels had urged them to escape from the cities by climbing up on the mountain quickly as the cities faced destruction. They did not pay heed to the warnings. The excuse offered was that Lot was too old to climb the steep mountain. However, the Biblical narrative states that sometime later, Lot and his two daughters had moved into a cave in the hills. The daughters got him drunk and slept with him, and thereby each of them bore a child from their own father (Gen 19, 30-38).

Lot and his wife would not abide by God's instructions. The angels had told them not to look back after leaving the city. But Lot's wife could not contain herself. She did look back and was turned into a pillar of salt (19, 26). The lesson is that it is suicidal to return to the original evil ways which had been declared as unacceptable.

Sodom, a Warning

Throughout the Bible, Sodom is portrayed as an example of ungodliness. *"By turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes, he condemned them to extinction and made them an example to those who were to be ungodly"* (2 Pt 2, 6). By bringing up Sodom, St Peter emphasizes the importance of the lessons in the story for the future.

Everyone must honour God's Commandments and directives relating to man's relationship with God, other

people and the universe. The purpose of creating man and providing him a companion in the form of a woman is clearly explained in the first Chapter of the Bible. If we neglect God's injunctions and live our lives in a wayward fashion, seeking satisfaction in momentary pleasures, we shall suffer the same fate that befell Sodom and Gomorrah.

The story of Sodom should serve as a warning to keep away from wrongdoings. The aim of the story is to inspire Abraham to teach his children to walk in the righteous path of the Lord. If justice is denied to the poor, their cries will rise to heaven. The Lord would respond to them, by even pouring a rain of fire on the wicked. We pray to be spared from such a punishment.

THE GOD WHO HEARS THE CRY

“In the course of those many days the king of Egypt died. And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition” (Ex 2, 23-25).

Exodus is a decisive event to understand how man’s folly and perfidy impact the whole universe. The heirs of Abraham ended up as slaves in Egypt. The Lord liberated them with his mighty and outstretched arm, adopted them as His own people and settled them in the Promised Land. These events are narrated in the Book of Exodus. We can observe how the wicked actions of man affect his life, his community and nature at large.

Slaves in Egypt

A people coming from the East invaded the land of Egypt and established a new dynasty, called Hyksos. It must have been during the initial period of their rule that Joseph was raised to the highest office in Egypt.

On Joseph’s behest, Jacob arrived in Egypt with his children as a guest of Pharaoh (Gen 41-50). The family

was allotted the most fertile part of Egypt, the Goshen area, on the North-East side of river Nile. Being close to a river, the land was very fertile. On the other hand, since the place was situated in North-East boarder of Egypt, the presence of Israelites there would serve as a deterrent to any who could be tempted to invade the Egyptian territory.

Life for the Israelites in Egypt was rosy and smooth, and their luck held out close to a century and a half. Sometime near 1560, native Egyptians defeated the Hyksos Dynasty and regained power. With the change of rulers, the luck of Israelites ended and their miseries began. *“There arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph”* (Ex 1, 8). The new rulers oppressed the Israelites. Even after two centuries of sojourn in Egypt, they were viewed as aliens. Egyptians hated them. They feared them, though they needed them to sustain their economy. This was what gave rise to the events leading up to the Exodus.

Source of the Cry

The new rulers tried out different strategies with the Israelites, some meant to reduce their numbers and some to retain them as slaves (Ex 1, 8-22). They were tortured and persecuted, with the goal of bringing down their numbers. But that was not to be. To the contrary, they grew in numbers. The rulers decided next to have all the male children of the Israelites killed. Since it is men who create trouble, the rulers thought it best to do away with their male children. Mid-wives were instructed to kill all new-born baby-boys. This again did not work out well.

Some of the mid-wives refused to carry out the orders, regarding them as inhuman. Shiphrah and Puvah, supported by Jochebed and Miriam, were in the forefront of this movement (E x 2, 1-10; 6, 20). They did their best

to protect the male children, otherwise condemned to die. Ironically, the very person chosen by God to liberate Israelites from the slavery of Egypt was brought up like a prince by the daughter of Pharaoh in the royal palace.

God's Response to the Cry

Moses, on reaching adulthood tried, at first, to liberate his people through violent means. When he saw an Egyptian scourging an Israelite in a merciless manner, Moses was incensed. He killed the Egyptian on the spot and buried him in the sand with the hope of starting a liberation movement, but it did not work out as he had expected. It had, in fact, an adverse effect, so much so that Moses had to flee from Egypt to save his own life. He took refuge in the desert where he came to know God and the will of God for him.

The cries of the suffering Israelites reached the portals of God's abode. The liberation process took off the ground. Moses, who had run away to escape the wrath of Pharaoh, was sent by God as the liberator of the Israelites. On feeling strengthened, Moses returned back to Egypt. Moses had learned many useful lessons by then. God appeared to him in the form of a burning bush and entrusted to him the mission of leading the Israelites. He was assured of God's presence and protection during the process of escape from Egypt.

The Nature of God

When Moses approached the burning bush, he was warned not to get too close. *"Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground"* (Ex 3, 5). The place has been made holy by the presence of God. This is true, not only

of Mount Sinai, but of all the earth, because there is no place where God is not present. His presence turns the entire world holy. Therefore, earth needs to be treated with care and reverence.

Removing slippers is a mark of respect and devotion. That was the first lesson Moses was taught. He would gradually become aware of the holiness of the place he is in. We have to consider earth as the footstool of God and respect it. This directive applies to all at all times.

Gradually God revealed to Moses who He is, a compassionate God who hears the cry of the oppressed. *“I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites” (Ex 3, 7-8).*

It is important to note that God refers to Israelites as “my people”. They are the heirs to the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are the people of God. God has come down to liberate them from the hands of their persecutors.

God is the One who came down, hearing the cry of the oppressed. He would put an end to their oppression, liberate them and settle them in a land of their own. He is the God of the Patriarchs, the liberator, who would lead the exodus. For the first time ever, God revealed His name, to Moses. To the question of Moses, “What is your name?” God said, “I am who am” (Ex 3, 14). The Hebrew word is “Yahweh”. What does it mean? How could “I am who am” be a name? There can only be one response. We shall all come to know God gradually, in course of time, through experience.

God will reveal Himself to us through His actions. One of God's plans is liberation of Israelites from the slavery in Egypt. The name "Yahweh" appears again and again and its meaning will be explained. Israelites will not pronounce the name "Yahweh" because of the great respect they had for God. When they see "Yahweh", they would pronounce it as "Adonai", which means "My Lord". This is the word used in most of the translations.

A name is like the definition of a person because it is through name that we come to identify and distinguish people and things, one from another. The name "Yahweh" helps us to learn about God and to know Him.

Exodus 6, 7 reads as follows: *"I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians"*. This also forms the first of the "Ten Commandments" and is the foundation for all the remaining nine Commandments. *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage"* (Ex 20, 2).

God has eyes to see, ears to hear and a heart to understand. He sees the suffering of His people. He hears their cry. He understands their pain. When God hears their cry, He does not remain passive or indifferent. He acts. He would find out the reason for their cry and remedy it. This is the God who revealed Himself through numerous Exodus events. The oppressor who refuses to liberate the oppressed would have to confront God Himself among the oppressed as the opposite party. This is the message which was conveyed through the ten plagues in Egypt and the drowning of Pharaoh's great army in the deep sea.

Great Plagues

Rulers in Egypt turned down the order of the Lord to free Israelites. They were concerned about the loss to the exchequer that Egypt would suffer if they allowed slaves to depart. For, after all, slaves were toiling hard, day and night, without any remuneration.

God was not, however, pleased with the actions of Egyptian rulers. Slavery was not a system in God's scheme of things. All people are created equal, made in the image and the likeness of God. Therefore, enslavement of one people by another is not permissible. God commanded the Egyptian rulers repeatedly through Moses to "let my people go". He had also served them a strong warning, "*Let my son go that he may serve me*"; *if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son*" (Ex 4, 23).

God gave Pharaoh adequate time to think through the matter and to change his mind if he wanted to. God commanded him again to free Israelites. Several great plagues were inflicted on Egyptians one after another (Ex 7-10). Water turned into blood. Frogs and bugs were let loose all over the land. Contagious diseases spread rapidly. Animals died. People were infected by foul smelling sores. Rain of stones fell over Egypt. Locusts ate all the crops. Country was covered with total darkness for three full days. But none of these calamities moved Pharaoh to repent as he interpreted all of them as routine occurrences.

For example, during rainy season waters coming from red stone area are bound to turn waters in Nile to the colour of blood. Again, during rainy season, it is natural to have a much larger number of frogs. When they die, bugs will abound, with the result people would have sores. Animals could die and there is nothing to be alarmed about. Locusts

eating up the crops is a regular feature. Rain of stone is nothing but water that has turned ice, hard like stone. A sand storm can envelop earth with darkness. Thus, Pharaoh explained away all the plagues God had sent on Egyptians as natural occurrences.

Everything had happened at the command of Moses, and when he prayed to the Lord for their cessation, they all ended. It was a sign that God had sent. The lesson was that any abuse of nature will invite severe punishments. The Lord of the universe would respond by sending down a disaster. Pharaoh and Egyptians failed to learn this lesson. As a result, they were given a ghastlier sign through the killing of the first-born sons of both man and beast. Here king, people and animals, everyone without exception, were subjected to the same punishment (Ex 11, 1-10; 12, 29-36).

When Pharaoh lost his first-born son, he realized his mistake, repented and let the Israelites go free (Ex 12, 37-42). But the change was short-lived. When slaves finally left the country, Pharaoh went after them with an army to bring them back. His stubbornness ended only when his army was drowned in the sea.

The image of God that He sides with the poor and the oppressed is very apparent in this incident. Pharaoh and his army followed the Israelites on the path that had miraculously been created in the sea, but waters of the sea quickly returned back to the original state. As a result, the Egyptian army came face to face with the true God in the middle of the sea.

“Just before dawn, the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw them into a panic. He made the wheels of their chariots get stuck, so that they moved with great difficulty. The Egyp-

tians said, “The Lord is fighting for the Israelites against us. Let us get out here” (Ex 14, 24-25).

Finally, they did learn their lesson but, by then, it was far too late. On God’s command, Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea, which had parted to make way for Israelites, returned back to the original state and drowned all the Egyptians. “Thus, the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore” (Ex 14, 30).

The Lesson of the Exodus event

Exodus stands out as the central event in the Old Testament because, through Exodus, the people of Israel came to know who God is. There are several lessons to learn from this experience.

1. All the people are created equal and God loves and values everybody uniformly. Therefore no one must hurt, oppress or exploit anyone else.

2. God will hear the cry of the oppressed and He would punish severely anyone who causes unjustified pain to another. God is merciful and, therefore, He would always side with the poor and the weak.

3. Some might think there is an apparent contradiction in saying that God is partial towards the poor. But one must recognize this partiality rather as the mark of compassion and mercy. As a mother hen would fight, with all its might when an eagle tries to steal its chicks, God too would go to any extent to protect the poor. God’s aim is not to destroy the wicked but to put an end to injustice.

4. Let no one think that the poor lack support and they can easily be exploited. This is not true. The Lord is there to defend them. The disaster which fell on the Egyptians

should be seen as a warning. The shouts of Egyptians must always be resounding in our ears. “*The LORD is fighting for the Israelites against us. Let us get out of here.*”

5. It is through forces of nature that God sends out signs about impending dangers. Plagues that befell Egypt should serve as a warning to us. We will do well to remember Jesus’s advice to learn to read the signs of the times (Lk 12, 54 – 56).

6. The imperial edict that all male children born to the Israelites should be thrown into River Nile was the height of cruelty inflicted on them. The aim was to reduce the Israeli population. The measure, though, turned out to be the proverbial last straw which moved God to intervene personally on behalf of the Israelites. It is shocking to see the casual approach of contemporary society towards cases of abortion. There is no realization that the numerous abortions carried out would bring about great calamities on the universe.

7. God who revealed His name to Moses would listen to the cry of the innocent. Plagues that befell Egypt must be seen as a warning. Bodies of horses and horsemen on the seashore bear witness to the fact that God hears the cry of the oppressed. If, even after seeing these signs, we do not **change track**, similar disasters are likely to befall us.

TEMPTATIONS IN THE DESERT

“All the people took off the rings of gold which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made a molten calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Ex 32, 3-4).

The Israelites had experienced the power and might of God who came down in response to their cry to rescue them from the miseries of slavery. There were numerous obstacles during their journey from Goshen to the Red Sea, but with God’s assistance, they could overcome them successfully. They easily walked through the path formed in the middle of the Red Sea while the Egyptian army which chased them was swallowed up by waters of the sea. The journey through the desert was directed at the Promised Land. It is a historical and geographical reality, containing deeper theological implications.

A Pilgrimage

The journey to the Promised Land was like a pilgrimage to a holy place. The Israelites had to travel through a desert where they would encounter many problems and difficulties. There were times when they had to starve without food and drinking water. The destination itself seemed

to be far away, nowhere within sight. The harsh realities of desert made slavery in Egypt appear less painful and more bearable. There were temptations to turn back to Egypt. In fact, they looked for a new leader to take them back.

Desert is a place where numerous temptations lie hidden. A review of the temptations the Israelites had to face will be helpful, for after all, we are also pilgrims on earth journeying toward the Kingdom of God. A close examination of the temptations in the desert might be helpful to discern the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and temptations put forward by the Satan.

1. Idol

Despite numerous temptations and protests, the Israelites did reach the valley of Mount Sinai. Moses guided them and gave them courage. At the foot of Mount Sinai, they entered into a Covenant with God who accepted them as His own, a priestly nation and a holy people (Ex 19, 5-6). The covenant was ratified by sprinkling the blood of the sacrificed animal (Ex 24, 8).

Moses then went up the mountain to receive the details of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments. There was no news from him for many days. People grew impatient with the delay. This gave rise to a temptation, to create an idol for worship. This was said to be the first sin of Israel. *“Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him”* (Ex 32, 1).

The Hebrew term “Elohim” is a plural form of the word and is translated as “gods”. But there is only one God Almighty and so the word is translated as “God”. It is important to note that the first letter of the word will be in capital if the translation refers to the Almighty God. But

if the reference is to other gods, the first letter of the word will be small. This is what has been done from the first chapter of Genesis.

Whatever the definition of the word “Elohim” be, people insisted that Aaron the priest should make them a god. They forgot the protection God Almighty had provided them and the miracles He had performed to save them from Egyptian army. Even before the blood of the covenant sprinkled on them had dried up, they came up with the demand to create an idol for them. They pushed aside the God who had guided their lives thus far and instead sought a god made by human hands. They preferred a god whom they can see, touch, and carry around; a god who, they thought, would act as they wished. It is totally the opposite of what they had seen and experienced so far. Here man is creating god and dictating what god should do, rather than obeying god’s commandments and following His directions.

God had chosen Aaron as High priest to lead the people in accordance with His will, to present before God their prayers and requests and to bless them in the name of God. Ironically, the same priest collected ornaments from the people and molded an ox out of them for them to worship. Aaron’s actions would leave us shocked. The ox was a symbol of prosperity and reproduction. It was also used as the carrier of Baal whom the Canaanites worshiped as a god. Ox was also projected as the image of Baal himself. It was the idol of such an ox that Aaron fashioned for his people to worship.

The People upon seeing the idol were wild with joy and shouted, “*These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*” (Ex 32, 4). Aaron too grew very enthusiastic. He built an altar in front of the ox

and announced a celebration. He consecrated the ox as the Lord. People ate and drank and made merry. The lessons they learned in the past had been thrown to the wind. The festival turned into a wild revelry, all this under the leadership of Aaron, the High Priest.

The Covenant at Mount Sinai was a central event in the Salvation History. But even while the precepts of the Covenant were being handed over to Moses on top of the mountain, down at the foot of the mountain the terms of the Covenant were being broken, and that too under the leadership of Aaron the High Priest!

When Moses saw what was happening, he flung the tablets containing the Ten Commandments at the golden idol. They were destroyed. He ordered them to powder the golden idol, mix it with water and drink it, to drive home the seriousness of their sacrilegious action. However, eventually Moses relented and mediated with God on their behalf. God forgave them and promised to continue to lead them (Ex 32, 30-33, 17).

Relevance of idol worship today

Worship of the golden bull carries a lot of lessons for us. People wanted a god they could see, touch and carry around as they please. Actually, it was not God at all, but an idol they had created for themselves out of metal. It might be often difficult distinguish an idol from true God. In a religion that promotes polytheism, the many gods they worship could all be idols. Saints and living persons could be made into idols by those who worship them and expect to fulfill their desires and petitions. Even pilgrim centers where many miracles are said to be taking place, and objects like relics of saints and statues also can become idols. With so many types of idols, the faithful were easily misled.

Idol as a concept is applied not only to gods of religions, but to other aspects of life as well. Anything one considers of supreme value, other than God, becomes an idol for him. That could be Luxury, name and fame, or the ambition to amass wealth, which, according to St Paul, is the root cause of all (1 Tim 6, 10). It can be said in summary that idols are found everywhere in the material world. Greed for power, Religious fanaticism, terrorism and intolerance towards other religions and ideologies, practical and theoretical atheism, consumerism are all idols that are being worshipped in the present age that is often qualified as postmodern and post truth age.

Aarons can be found everywhere, particularly where wealth is aplenty. They help create idols and promote grandiose celebrations. Those who engage in such pursuits would have to respond to Moses's question, "*What did this people do to you that you have brought a great sin upon them?*" (Ex 32, 21). Aaron got away easily, with an evasive reply. He said that people had brought him gold asking for help and he put it in the fire and an ox was formed. A neat story indeed! Leaders and people will have to give an account for all their deeds and misdeeds to God who oversees everything in the world.

2. Greed – Passion

The second lesson to learn from the travel of the Israelites through the desert is about needs and wants. People who crossed the Red Sea and moved into the desert had neither food to eat nor water to drink. They suffered from hunger and thirst and, naturally, they complained to Moses. As their needs were justified, God responded to their requests sympathetically by showering Manna from heaven and by providing water from rock (Ex 15, 22 - 16, 36).

They ate and drank to their full and gained strength to continue their journey.

As days passed, people grew tired of Manna, though at one time they had loved it as the food of angels. When they remembered the meal they were served in Egypt, particularly meat, Manna seemed, in comparison, a tasteless food (Num 21, 5; 11, 4-6). They forgot the miseries they suffered in Egypt and their cries for liberation. Now, all that they wanted was tasty food, other than Manna. They began to cry aloud for meat and sumptuous food!

Actually, what they wanted was not food for their survival or sustenance but rich, tasty food for enjoyment. God, no doubt, heard their cry, but responded with a severe censure for their unjustified demand. They got the food they craved for but far in excess. The tasty food they craved for turned into a curse.

“Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, “Who will give us meat to eat? For it was well with us in Egypt.” Therefore, the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall not eat one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the LORD who is among you, and have wept before him, saying, “Why did we come forth out of Egypt?”” (Num 11, 18-20).

The Lord kept His promise, *“There went forth a wind from the LORD, and it brought quails from the sea, and let them fall beside the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and a day’s journey on the other side, round about the camp, and about two cubits above the face of the earth. And the people rose all that day, and all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quails; he who gathered least*

gathered ten homers; and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp.

“While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD smote the people with a very great plague. Therefore, the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving” (Num 11, 31-34). The word Kibroth-hattavah means grave of the greedy.

Kibroth-hattavah holds important lessons as it provides a fair picture of acquisitive culture prevalent today which drives people to amass wealth well beyond what they truly need. Even so, they remain dissatisfied. It is said that banquet halls in the ancient Rome were provided with an attached vomitorium. When guests had eaten sufficient food, especially the delicacies, they would visit the vomitorium and vomit out the food deliberately so that they could eat more food again. Kibroth-hattavah should be a warning to all who may be tempted to violate norms set by God, not only in regard to food but also about other goods such as vehicles and luxury items.

3. Leadership

Another temptation which showed up its ugly head during the journey through the desert was lust for power. Bible speaks of this issue, which had infiltrated into both the spiritual and the material spheres. Moses, who was well aware of his limitations, was reluctant to take on the mantle of leadership but was compelled to do so by God. Left with no choice, he had assumed the leadership role. Aaron, his elder brother, was appointed as his helper and spokesperson (Ex 4, 1-17).

With passage of time, some people grew jealous of

Moses and his leadership position. Jealousy developed into resentment and revolt. The crisis was evident among the three leaders themselves, Moses, Aaron and Miriam. *“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman; and they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” (Num 12, 1-2).*

The Gentile woman whom Moses had married was just an excuse that Aaron and Miriam needed to mount a rebellion, while the real cause of their anger was jealousy. Of all the three leaders, Moses happened to be the youngest. The elder sister Miriam had stood guard for him, while the elder brother Aaron was more of a spokesperson. The two elder siblings could not reconcile themselves to the idea of their younger brother positioned above them at the top of the hierarchy.

Fortunately, God intervened confirming His support to Moses and issued a warning to the brother-sister duo. Though both Aaron and Miriam were guilty and had committed a similar offence, only Miriam was punished. She was afflicted with leprosy. The sacred author does not say why Aaron was spared. It was in fact Aaron who first noticed the affliction on his sister. Aaron prayed for forgiveness and requested Moses to supplicate for Miriam (Num 12, 9-16). Aaron, being a priest, was spared from leprosy although the warning itself was directed at both of them.

Time and again, there was a scramble for leadership. It was the turn of Korah, Dathan and Abiram to rise against Moses and Aaron. Protests and brawls followed. God’s response to these developments was scary and brutal. *“The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men that belonged to Korah and all*

their goods” (Num 16, 32). There was a competition for the office of priesthood as well, but the issue was resolved through a process mandated by God Himself which resulted in the endorsement of Aaron to the high office (Num 17, 1-11).

Relevance Today

Race and rivalry for power are noticeable all across a society, at all levels and at all places. When Pope Francis cautions that there is no place for power struggle in the Catholic Church, it is an admission that the Church is not free of this malady. Everyone seems to crave for high positions so as to be able to enjoy its benefits, such as name, fame and luxury which go with it. History has proved that lust for power is the main factor behind the ruin of many a nation and the fall of many individuals. Love of power would explain increased incidence of conflicts among different religious groups.

God’s assessment of Moses, flattering by any standards, should be of interest to us. “*Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth*” (Num 12, 3). Moses had met God face to face and had spoken to him (Num 12, 6-8; Dt. 34, 10). It was God who had appointed him as a leader; he had not volunteered for the role himself. God chooses whom He wants; strengthens him and entrusts him with a mission. So, no one has any reason to feel arrogant about his position or, in case he is not selected, to be jealous of the chosen person. This is the lesson God intended to teach us through the events relating to the journey in the desert.

What has Jesus taught us about leadership? Significantly, He chose to speak of leadership, and the unique nature of the leadership in the Church, only after washing the

feet of His disciples. *“I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him” (Jn 13, 15-16).*

When the disciples were caught debating as to who among them was the greatest, Jesus intervened and explained the true nature of authority. *“The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves” (Lk 22, 25-26).* A position of authority should inspire a person to serve others and to take on the humblest tasks in the community. There is no place for feelings of jealousy, competition or pride among followers of Christ.

4. Cowards

With help from the Lord, Israelites overcame great obstacles and reached the final camping ground, very close to the borders of the Promised Land. However, instead of proceeding forward to fight and capture the land, they turned back and roamed around the desert for forty years, due to lack of courage.

At Kadesh Barnea in the desert of Paran, Twelve men were chosen from among the people and sent out to spy on the Promised Land. They saw for themselves the beauty and the fertility of the Land God was going to give them. Two of them brought back a bunch of grapes to provide evidence of the country’s prosperity. However, most of the spies were convinced that the Israelites would not be able to capture the land because the local people were far stronger and mightier than they.

Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb though, thought

otherwise, but people were unwilling to believe them. Finally, a decision was reached to select a leader in place of Moses to lead them back to Egypt.

Cowardice was the biggest obstacle to their dream of entering the Promised Land. The fact that two full chapters in the Book of Numbers (13-14) and a total of 78 verses are devoted to this topic shows the great importance the sacred author attaches to this subject.

Lessons of the conflict at Kadesh

The first lesson that we learn from the experiences of the Israelites is that our own pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God will not be a cake walk. Those not ready to fight for the Kingdom of God will not be able to inherit it. Jesus Himself has said: *“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force” (Mt 11, 12).* *“The law and the prophets were until John; since then, the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and every one enters it violently” (Lk 16,16).*

The fight is not against any person or an institution but a fight against evil. This will be a fight to death and we should be prepared to take the Kingdom by force. We might have to fight with ourselves too until the goal is reached. Only then shall we be entitled to enter the Kingdom of God.

When the New Heaven and the New Earth become a reality, entry will be denied to eight types of persons. The first category is that of cowards, *“As for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death”*

(Rev 21, 8). “For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Mt 7, 14).

All of Christ’s teachings emphasize the need for a pilgrim to have the courage and the readiness to face difficulties. *“Great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14, 25-27; 9,57-62; Mt 10, 34-38).*

The events at Kadesh Barnea reveals cowardice. People were condemned to wander in the desert for forty years. *“According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years, and you shall know my displeasure” (Num 14, 34).* An entire generation spent their days in the desert. Their lives ended in the desert. Only the generation that followed reached the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua.

Those who want to enter the Kingdom of God should be willing to pay the price. This has become truer today, more than ever in the past. Thousands of Christians are facing persecution and death just for being Christians, especially in countries where they are a minority. We can easily recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit among the persecuted Christians, who endure their hardships heroically.

However, the ranks of Christians, willing to live by Christian values and principles, are on the decline, especially in Christian countries. Faith itself is seen as absurd. People employ different ways to avoid the demands made

by Christian values. After all, it is so much easier to live our lives without having to worry about Christian principles.

The events in the desert contain powerful lessons. The golden calf at Mount Sinai, the greed for possessions, the craving for pleasures at Kibroth-hattavah, the frequent contests for leadership and the cowardice displayed at Kadesh Barnea. We are all pilgrims journeying together, headed towards eternal life. We must be on guard against temptations and strive to overcome them with the grace of God. In this regard, the experiences of the Israelites provide us with valuable guidelines.

BLESSING AND CURSE

“See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you this day, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you, life and death, blessing and curse; therefore, choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them” (Dt 30,15-20).

In the Book of Deuteronomy

The Pilgrimage to the Promised Land had reached its final stage. People had set up their camps in the plane of Moab, fully prepared to start a war at any time. Book

of Deuteronomy is shown as the final discourse of Moses, the leader who liberated Israel from the slavery in Egypt. People were reminded of the way God had guided them through their travels and the wonders He had performed along the way for their benefit. They were made to remember the temptations, sins, punishments, protection and blessings, and were exhorted to continue in the ways of the Lord.

The blessings tell us what the benefits would be if we obey God's commandments and the curses describe what the miseries are likely to be, if we disregard His commands.

People have the freedom to choose as God does not force anyone into a specific course of action. He expects loving submission, and not slavish obedience born of fear. Moses taught them that their decisions would impact their lives and their descendants. This is said clearly in the Bible verses quoted above. Life and death, good and evil, blessings and curses, are all explained in detail. The decision is left to the people. God desires that they choose life. This is reiterated many times in the Book of Deuteronomy.

In Dt 27, 1-26, the phrase "Cursed be..." is used 12 times, to emphasize the importance of obeying the precepts of the Covenant. The first instruction is regarding avoidance of idol worship. Subsequent instructions highlight the attitude and the conduct required in personal relationships. People must honour their parents; give protection to orphans, widows and foreigners. Certain norms have to be observed in sexual engagements with close family members. In all matters, God's laws and teachings should be strictly adhered to.

Rewards for obeying God's laws are described in Dt 28, 1-14 and punishments for violations in Dt. 28, 15-68. Blessings are associated with a happy life in the Promised

Land. Curses speak of punishments, which would become more and more severe as the days pass.

In the Book of Leviticus

The People of Israel were selected as a “Priestly nation and Holy people” to worship the True God. Rubrics of this worship, which is their main responsibility, are prescribed in the Book of Leviticus. Chapter 26 forms the conclusion of this book.

While blessings are discussed in Lv 26, 1-13, curses are narrated in Lv 26, 14-45. If the precepts of the Covenant are obeyed, people would be showered with blessings and if disobeyed, they would have to face curses. The book ends with the comment: *“These are the statutes and ordinances and laws which the LORD made between him and the people of Israel on Mount Sinai by Moses” (Lv 26, 46)*. Chapter 27, dealing with directions with regard to offerings is added as an appendix.

The Conclusion of the Covenant

The relationship between God and the people of Israel is presented as a Covenant in the Bible. Even in those days, international covenants existed, particularly among the Hittites. They followed a specific structure that can be seen in the presentation about the Covenant in the Bible. For the people of Israel, the most important Covenant was the Covenant of Sinai. The entire Pentateuch is centred on this Covenant.

There are six parts to the covenant an emperor makes with his vassal kings:

1. Introduction: Name and details of the emperor with whom the covenant is made

2. Historical background: Service the emperor had rendered to the vassals.
3. Regulations: Orders to be obeyed by the vassals.
4. The record of the covenant is to be kept in the worshipping centre.
5. Names and details of the witnesses
6. Blessings and Curses

The structure could be seen in all the descriptions of the Covenant at Mount Sinai. The last part, on Blessings and Curses, is particularly relevant to our discussion. Both parties are obliged to adhere to the provisions of the Covenant. It is the Emperor who sets the terms of the covenant. Assurances mainly relate to protection of the vassal kingdoms. At the same time, it is clarified through the list of curses that violation of the covenant will result in severe punishment.

The fact that the witnesses to the covenant were the gods that the kings worshipped shows the importance attached to the terms of the covenant. Record of the covenant was to be kept in the main shrine of the country. Contents of the covenant were to be communicated to the people on certain occasions to make them aware of the provisions of the covenant and to remind them about their obligations.

The Covenant at Mount Sinai contains all these elements. What God has done the people are narrated in the first 18 chapters of the Book of Exodus. These accounts are repeated again in the Nm 10–36 and in Dt 1-11. Terms and provisions of the Covenant are explained after these introductions (Ex 20-23; Dt 12-26). Almost the entire Book of Leviticus, (1-25) describe the Laws of Covenant. With this background we shall be able to interpret the meaning of blessings and curses.

Blessings

Blessings which would be showered if the precepts of the Covenant are obeyed are recorded in Lv 26, 1-13 and Dt 28, 1-14 in similar way. All the blessings are related to material gains and prosperity. The Book of Leviticus speaks of blessings such as favourable climate, rich harvest, protection from enemies, peace in the nation and many children (Lv 26, 1-13). God's continuing presence with the people has been guaranteed, to serve as a proof of the blessings. *"I will make my abode among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people"* (Lv 26, 11-12).

All the assurances given are restated by way of confirmation towards the end of the narration. *"I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; and I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect"* (Lv 26, 12-13). Walk erect, not being anyone's slave; not bending in front of anyone; be a people with dignity and live as the children of God for which God would provide the opportunities.

Similar ideas and sentiments are put forth in the Book of Deuteronomy, *"If you obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments which I command you this day, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your beasts, the increase of your cattle, and the*

young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading-trough. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out” (Dt 28, 1-6).

Blessings would positively impact all areas of the people’s lives. God the liberator freed a group of slaves, adopted them as His own people and granted them a respectable place as though their dignity would perpetuate His name on earth. Words such as cities and fields, represent different areas of life. In other words, there will be prosperity in all the areas. The basket refers to the basket used to sow the seeds. This is indicated by its relationship with the kneading-trough. Everything indicates that from the sowing to the making of bread, they will enjoy God’s blessings.

“Barak” is the Hebrew word that is translated as “bless”. This is derived from the term, Berek, which means the knee, obviously referring to the practice of receiving blessings kneeling down. When parents bless or offer blessings, children would kneel down to receive the blessing. Over a period of time, blessing by parents came to represent God’s own blessings. Interestingly, the same word is used to convey the idea, ‘praying on the knees’. Kneeling down is essential to receiving God’s blessing as it conveys total surrender to God. The Bible puts forth surrender to God as an essential requirement to receive God’s blessings.

Blessing influences not only people personally but all their various life situations as well. Freedom, dignity as the children of God and material prosperity are all nothing but instances of God’s blessings. Presence of such a people in the world is bound to influence the other nations to come to know the true God. His name will be glorified and thus people of Israel would be a light to the world.

God had poured out His blessings abundantly in the beginning of creation. *“God blessed them, and God said to*

them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen 1, 28). The man who represents God on earth should be a blessing to the entire universe. To be so, he has to do only one thing: Listen to the word of God and live in accordance with the precepts of the Covenant.

Curses

Curses incurred for disobedience will be the very opposite of blessings. It is significant to note that the description of curses is five times longer than that of blessings. Blessings are elaborated in Lv 26, 1-13 and in Dt 28, 1-14. Curses are described in Dt 28, 15-68 and in Lv 26, 14-46. From this we can realize how important obedience is and how destructive disobedience can be. Obedience to God’s commands earns us His blessings in all areas of life. Similarly, disobedience would adversely affect all aspects of our lives, and, in addition, the vast universe as well.

In both books, punishments are shown as calamities which would happen in the future. But the Israelites had already suffered calamities at different times in the past, especially in the 8th century B.C. when the Northern kingdom, Israel which consisted of 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel, came under the rule of Assyria. Again, in the 6th century B.C., Judah was invaded and destroyed by Babylon. Many Bible scholars are of the view that these incidents of the past are included in the enumeration of curses presented as prophecies and warnings.

Whatever may be the circumstances, there is no ambiguity about the meaning and purpose of warnings and curses. As long as they obey God’s Commandments, the people of Israel will retain their position as the “people of

God”. This is a message highlighted from the beginning of Salvation History, from the days paradise was lost to the time of Babylonian Captivity; indeed, to the advent of the New Testament. The validity of warnings will continue up to the time eternal punishment is pronounced.

“But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading-trough. Cursed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out” (Dt 28, 15-19).

Curses for disobedience are the very opposite of blessings received for obedience. The same points are emphasized in both blessings and curses.

“*Arur*” is the Hebrew word which is translated as “be cursed”. This word is derived from the root “*Arar*” which means “curse”. This was the word used when punishment was pronounced for the first sin. “*Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life” (Gen 3, 17).* However, it should not be concluded that the earth was cursed by God. It might be more appropriate to say that man’s disobedience brought on God’s curse on him and on the ground.

God does not hate or curse anyone. Blessing or curse is merely the outcome of a person’s action. If an electrical instrument is used without adhering to the instructions in

the user's manual, the gadget is likely to get damaged and can, at times, cause serious harm to those around.

Curse is akin to what would happen if an instrument, designed to use 110 volts, is plugged into a socket of 220 volts. Likewise, if a person, who does not know to swim, falls into the deep waters of a river, is sure to be suffocated. If anyone trips or jumps down from the 10th floor of an apartment, he is sure to get injured in a serious manner. None of these occurrences can be labelled as a curse of God, but the tragedy is simply the outcome of a person's action.

In the universe, everyone has his place. There are laws to be observed. If we violate the laws designed by the Creator, there will be consequences by way of calamities. In the same way, if man goes against the plan of God, there will be unwanted outcomes. Commandments of God are like the user's manual for an instrument. Curses demonstrate how terrible the consequences will be if we break God's Commandments. Disobedience will bring in pain and distress.

Leviticus 26, 14-45

Descriptions here reveal that punishment for disobedience will become more and more severe with the passage of time over successive violations. The Same punishments are mentioned time and again, such as illness, attack by enemies, climate change, drought and attack by wild animals. This list represents punishments for first time violations (Lv 26, 14-22).

If people still do not repent, contagious diseases, attacks by enemies, foreign domination and famine will follow (Lv 26, 23-26). If violations persist still, famine will be acute, so much so people might be forced to consume

the body of the dead to sustain themselves. They will be cast out of the Promised Land and would have to live like slaves in an alien land (Lv 26, 27-39).

Punishments becoming more severe step by step are intended to serve as a call for repentance. *“If by this discipline you are not turned to me, but walk contrary to me, then I also will walk contrary to you, and I myself will smite you sevenfold for your sins. And I will bring a sword upon you, that shall execute vengeance for the covenant; and if you gather within your cities, I will send pestilence among you, and you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy.*

“When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in one oven, and shall deliver your bread again by weight; and you shall eat, and not be satisfied. And if in spite of this you will not hearken to me, but walk contrary to me, then I will walk contrary to you in fury, and chastise you myself sevenfold for your sins. You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters” (Lv 26, 23 -29).

God does not hate or reject people even when they are subjected to severe punishments. *“Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God” (Lv 26, 44).* This assurance clarifies where punishments originate from and what their true purpose is.

Deuteronomy 28, 15-68

Curses described in the Book of Leviticus are phrased in harsher language and dealt with at greater length in the Book of Deuteronomy. By way of introduction, it is said that the punishment will be the opposite of the blessing (Dt 28, 16-19). Everybody, whether they be city dwellers,

business people or farmers, will have to suffer the consequences of disobedience. No one will be exempted.

Punishments for first-time violations include mortal illness, rise in atmospheric temperature, severe draught and destruction of crops. (Dt 28,20-24). At the second stage, there will be invasion by enemies, defeat in wars, contagious diseases and foreign domination (28, 25-35).

At the third stage, punishment will be deportation and slavery in a far-off land (Dt 28, 36-37). Attack by locusts and destruction of crops would make life miserable (Dt 28, 38-46). Attack by enemies and blockade of fortress would cause severe famine. People will be forced to eat bodies of children who died of starvation, for their survival (Dt 28, 47-57). They will lose all interest in living due to severe illnesses, pandemics and famines (Dt 28, 58-67). They will be sent back to Egypt to be sold as slaves but no one will want to buy them. They will be subjected to severe hardships, and will neither be able to live or to die.

Why did such miseries occur? Everything happened because they did not obey God's Commandments. Punishments are meant to be warnings to teach them that the Promised Land is a gift of God and to merit it, they will have to obey the precepts of the Covenant. But the people did not live by God's commandments and so they had to endure calamities in their full severity; and that too, not once but several times. They had to suffer attack by Assyria, Babylonian captivity, Roman domination, destruction of Jerusalem and exile from the land of Israel.

Summary

The Promises made and the warnings given to Moses carry lessons to people of today also. Material prosperity aside, participation in the Kingdom of God is a promise

given to us through Jesus. However, the warnings about likely punishments for greed and love of wealth hold good even today.

Covid 19 that has terrorized the entire world reminds us of the great plagues God inflicted on Egypt. Pandemics, destruction of crops and climate change serve as warnings to us. It is high time that we changed our ways. If we do not, no one knows what lies in store for us. To re-establish the balance between man and universe we have to obey God's Commandments. Warnings of the Bible do not end here. More serious threats have been issued by the prophets. This will be the topic of our discussion next.

THE VIEW OF THE PROPHETS

“Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3, 1-2).

God fulfilled the promises He had made to Abraham and his descendants. After the death of Moses, under the leadership of Joshua, the people of Israel entered Canaan and settled there. But after the death of Joshua, lack of able leadership affected the people adversely. Judges who emerged at various times were not able to keep them together or to help them to stay faithful to God.

The Israelites were influenced by the religious practices, beliefs and customs of Canaan. Idol worship witnessed a sharp increase. In such a situation, God sent powerful prophets to enlighten the people about the will of God and to urge them to live a life based on the Word of God. Prophets appeared on and off after the last Judge Samuel and continued to be seen until the time of prophet Malachi, the last of the prophets.

The Prophets in Israel are divided into two groups: those who have books in their names and are known as

writing-prophets and those who have no books in their names and are referred to as non-writing prophets. There are 16 Prophets in the first group, Isaiah to Malachi. Baruch and Lamentations are part of the books of Jeremiah and therefore, they are also included among the books of Prophets.

There are many Prophets in the second group. Moses stands out as the greatest of them all (Num 12, 6-8; Dt 34, 10-12). The other notable Prophets are Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Micaiah, and Huldah. The last prophet in this group is John the Baptist who remains as the link between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Samuel and John the Baptist are separated by about eleven centuries (B.C. 1050 to A.D. 27). During this period, there were many prophets who called people to repentance. Their messages are presented here in a summarized form. The central theme of their teachings is, “*At least now change the track*”.

Samuel B.C. 1040 – 1020

It was apparent that the institution of Judges failed to deliver desired results in protecting and guiding the people. Priesthood, established to confirm God-man relationship, fared no better. Eli, the venerable priest, had grown old. His eyesight had failed and his mind had become weak. He could not discipline his children who misused priesthood and insulted people. The Lord sent an intermediary to warn them but they showed him no regard.

Finally, they were defeated by the attack of the Philistines. The Philistines took away the Ark of the Covenant the heart of their faith and the seat of the Lord. The two priests, Hophni and Phinehas were killed in the battle.

Hearing the tragic news Eli the father fell down, broke his neck and died (1 Sam 1-4). This was the situation when Samuel arrived on the scene.

God entrusted to Samuel the task of teaching the people the commandments of God and to motivate them to live by it. Though they were happy at first with his leadership, they became dissatisfied with him eventually. They demanded that they be given a king to lead them. Samuel rejected this request, not because it meant rejection of his leadership, but it was equal to rejecting God Himself. Even so, God ordered Samuel to accede to their request.

Samuel submitted to their demand but told them clearly that asking for a king amounted to rejecting God Himself and that they might bring on themselves some serious calamities. He listed the likely consequences of their demand, and concluded his discourse thus.

“He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day, you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day” (1 Sam 8, 17-18).

Samuel tried to explain to them the folly of depending on man instead of on God. The People, however, said that they needed to have a king as the other nations do (1 Sam 8, 5). He tried to remind them that they are different from all other peoples of the earth, because they were the people of God. But all his efforts proved futile.

The Institution of kingship had far-reaching consequences. From Saul to Zedekiah (B.C.1030 – 587) there were 42 kings and one queen, who ruled over the people of Israel. During the rule of the kings, God sent several Prophets to remind them of the precepts of the Covenant and to call them to conversion. The kingship ended finally in foreign rule, slavery and exile into a far-off land.

Nathan B.C. 1010 – 980

Samuel anointed Saul and then David as kings, one after the other. Thereafter Prophet Nathan made his appearance. He was a guide and advisor to David, and his severe critic as well. David was devoted to God and was obedient to His Commandments up to the time the entire kingdom came under his rule. He acknowledged that his ascent to the throne was because of God's blessings (2 Sam 7).

But, in course of time, King David forgot all that God had done for him. He became power greedy. He sent his army to capture the neighbouring kingdom. He drowned himself in the luxuries of the palace. One evening David rose from his siesta and strolled about on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing, who was very beautiful. He was instantly attracted to her. Even after knowing that she was the wife of Uriah, one of his own soldiers, he sent for her and slept with her.

When later she informed him that she was pregnant, David tried his best to make it appear that Uriah had fathered the child. But the plan failed because Uriah refused to spend time with his wife while the army was battling in the field. David was, therefore, left with no other option but to have Uriah killed. He then took Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, as his own wife. The fall of David, the devotee of God, was catastrophic but people did not know what had caused it. Those who knew the background were filled with fear and chose to keep silent (2 Sam 11).

God did not approve of what David had done (2 Sam 11, 27). Prophet we can see the real identity and character of a true prophet. "*And the LORD sent Nathan to David*" (2 Sam 12, 1) with a risky mission. He was to pronounce his verdict on, so to say, the chief justice of the kingdom,

the emperor of the nation. Nathan carried out his task with great diplomacy, by using a story about a sheep belonging to a poor man. The sheep was snatched away by a rich man for preparing a grand meal for his guest.

David had to arbitrate on the incident and pass his verdict. In so doing, unknowingly, David pronounced his own death sentence. *“As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die”* (2 Sam 12, 5). It was a harsh judgment, death sentence for killing a sheep! David did not think about the justification of such a harsh verdict. However, David did not know that he was pronouncing his own capital punishment until Nathan said, *“You are the man”* (2 Sam 12, 7).

Such is the prophetic mission. No matter to whom he is sent, the Prophet has to make the judgment of God known to him. When justice is administered, slave and king stand at the same level. Whoever did injustice, has to pay the price, by undergoing due punishment. A true prophet should have the courage to say, as in this case, to the king himself, that he had committed a heinous crime and that he would have to suffer the punishment imposed on him.

Before pronouncing the judgment for his crimes, all the things that God had done for David were narrated. His sins are first adultery and then murder committed to hide the crime. The details would shock not only David’s family but the entire kingdom of Israel. David’s children would follow their father’s example and commit worse crimes.

One of his sons would abuse one of his daughters, who was actually a sister to him. The children would kill each other. David would have to flee into the wilderness to escape from his own son. By the third generation the kingdom would be split in two. Prophet Nathan had prophesied all these events and had said that they were the consequences

of the sins committed by a person in authority. David repented and asked for God's forgiveness (2 Sam 12, 7-12). The story did end on a happy note. The goal of Nathan's prophetic mission was fully achieved.

Elijah B.C. 870- 860

One of the most powerful prophets we meet in the Salvation history is Elijah, who is projected as a model Prophet in the Bible. Israel was in a miserable condition as the queen herself had taken initiative in enforcing idol worship. Corruption and injustice, coupled with oppression and exploitation of the helpless, were at their peak and had spread all over. It was into such a situation that Prophet Elijah made his entry like a lightning. After he fulfilled the mission which the Lord had entrusted to him, he was taken up in a chariot of fire.

Two incidents in the prophetic life of Elijah deserve special attention, the sacrifice on Mount Carmel and the judgment in the vineyard of Naboth. Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Tyre, gave the lead in forcing the country into idol worship. She persuaded her husband to promulgate a law promoting Baal worship, while declaring worship of Yahweh a crime. Those who worshipped Yahweh were imprisoned, persecuted and killed.

At this juncture, Elijah appeared on the scene, challenging Baal worship. Baal was worshiped as the god of rain and prosperity. But, by the power of the Lord made known by Elijah, rain ceased in Israel (2 Kgs 17). The drought of three and a half years that ensued created havoc in the country. There was then the challenge and the show of strength, or more appropriately the show of truth, at Mount Carmel.

As directed by Elijah, King Ahab assembled the prophets of Baal and the people on Mount Carmel. Elijah placed a challenge before the crowd gathered on Mount Carmel: The God who sends down fire and accepts the sacrifice will be accepted as the true God. Around 450 prophets of Baal had gathered on one side while Elijah alone stood on the other. The prophets of Baal failed to bring down fire from heaven.

But God heard the prayers of Elijah. Fire came down from heaven and consumed the offering. Immediately there arose the joyful response of the people, “***The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God***” (1 Kgs 18, 39). Torrential rains followed and the drought ended. It became clear that Yahweh, God the Creator, was the Lord of rains and prosperity, and not Baal, the idol, created by human hands.

The second incident concerns the stance the prophet took administering justice (1 Kgs 21). Naboth had a vineyard near the king’s summer palace. King Ahab wanted to buy it but Naboth refused to sell the inherited property, as the Lord’s Law had prohibited such a sale (Lv 25, 23). But the queen intervened, manipulated the situation and had Naboth and his family killed. Fearing the king, judges had cooperated in the commission of the crime and people had kept silent.

The vineyard was confiscated and was made a part of the king’s property as he had desired. God sent Elijah to confront King Ahab in the very vineyard he had usurped by killing Naboth and his family. Elijah confronted the king with God’s judgment, as Nathan had done with King David.

“Thus, says the LORD, “Have you killed, and also taken possession?” And you shall say to him, `Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of

Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood". Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD. Behold, I will bring evil upon you; I will utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; And of Jezebel the LORD also said, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel'" (1 Kgs 21, 19-23).

This was the Prophetic voice which provided response to the cry of the innocent blood. The prophet had to risk his life to pronounce the judgment on the king. It was the voice of God which rose against those who had denied justice, against those who had oppressed the innocent. Though Ahab pretended to repent, God did not withdraw the judgment. The one who killed the innocent was himself killed mercilessly. Jezebel was thrown from the roof of the palace and was eaten by the dogs (1 Kgs 22, 29-39; 2 Kgs 9, 30-37).

Baal is not god of weather and seasons. King is not owner of the earth. Those who claim to worship the true God should honour the rights of others. Protection should be extended to the lowest in the land. If it is not done, nature would react and revolt. The sky will be closed. The rains will cease. The one who shed innocent blood will be punished by God. His blood will be licked up by dogs and his body will be eaten by wild animals. Dreadful are the warnings that Elijah had sounded and they apply to our lives as well.

Amos B.C. 760

Historically, Amos is the first Prophet who has a book in his name. After the death of Solomon, ten tribes of Israel separated to form the northern kingdom, Israel (B.C.931).

It was in this kingdom that Amos preached. The kingdom reached the pinnacle of prosperity during the time of Jeroboam II whose rule lasted for forty years (B.C. 783-743). For an outside observer this period would seem to be the golden age of Israel, as the nation prospered and there was peace in the kingdom. There was also a sharp increase in the commerce with neighbouring countries. Beautiful mansions were built and showcased as symbols of prosperity.

But no one took any notice of vast number of people living at the margins of the society, poor and hungry, exploited and abused by the rich. There was no one to listen to their lamentations, except the Lord. On one side there were the rich and on the other, the poor, with little or nothing to eat. God the Father and the Creator of the universe will not tolerate such wide disparity. He will not allow such conditions to continue for long.

God sent Amos a shepherd from of Tekoa, a village south of Jerusalem, carrying such a message, to the capital city of Samaria. Amos was a prophet who appeared and vanished like a lightning. He was not allowed to preach for more than a few weeks. The king suppressed and silenced his prophetic voice with a violent hand. Amos's voice, nonetheless, reverberated like the roar of a Lion, shaking the throne and the institutions seeped in corruption. The same sound can be heard even today in the universe. Amos can be heard by those who have ears to hear.

The three visions that Amos refers to in connection with his mission are pertinent to our discussion. *“The Lord GOD showed me: behold, he was forming locusts in the beginning of the shooting up of the latter growth; and lo, it was the latter growth after the king's mowing. When they had finished eating the grass of the land, (The pouring of*

the fire was diverted by the prayers of the Prophet) ... Then I said, "O Lord GOD, cease, I beseech thee! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!... "This also shall not be", said the Lord GOD. He showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line". Then the Lord said, "Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass by them; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword" (Am 7, 1-9).

Those who listened to Amos could not believe his words but no one could ignore his assessment of the society. He exposed the acts of injustice being perpetrated. *"Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes - they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted; a man and his father go in to the same maiden, so that my holy name is profaned; committed by those who have power and riches" (Am 2, 6-7).* The poor are denied justice as judges accept bribes to pronounce such judgments (Am 4, 1; 5, 6-7. 12; 6,12; 8, 47).

The Prophet pronounced judgment of God after enumerating the injustice and the cruelty in several different areas of society with supporting evidence. Before the final verdict was passed, God had warned them many times. The first warning was in the form of climate change which gave rise to severe famines. Contagious diseases and destruction of crops by pestilence were the second set of warnings. Next indication was the great pandemic which

killed many people. ***“Still, you did not return to me”***. This complaint is repeated five times in between the descriptions of the punishments (Amos 4, 4-11). At the end, final verdict was pronounced, *“Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!”* (Am 4, 12).

The outcome of that visit was beyond imagination. The forty-year rule of Jeroboam II ended in 746 B.C.; following which six kings ruled over a period of 24 years. The kingdom was embroiled in internal conflicts. There was an invasion by the Assyrian army who laid siege to the capital city of Samaria in 724 B.C. The siege prolonged for three years and made life of people in the city miserable. Finally, in 721 B.C., Samaria was captured and thousands of people deported to different parts of the empire as slaves. This marked the disappearance of the ten tribes of Israel from the face of the earth.

The people, who refused to listen to the warnings of Amos, had to suffer severe consequences. This could have been avoided if they had paid attention to Amos and had carried out what God had asked of them. *“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”* (Amos 5, 24). Unfortunately, this did not happen but everything else ran its course, as had been predicated. The Punishment that fell on Israel should serve as a lesson for us all, even on today.

Hosea B.C. 746-736

After Amos, hailed as the Prophet of social justice, Prophet Hosea appeared in the northern kingdom and he would end his days as the last Prophet to Israel. Hosea is known as the Prophet of God’s love. He compared the Covenantal relationship between the people of Israel and God

to the conjugal relationship between the husband and wife. He started the tradition of seeing God as the husband the people of Israel as the wife. Breaking the Covenant was considered as rejection of faith and idol worship was seen as adultery and prostitution. By doing this he expressed the warmth of God-man relationship and the seriousness of breaking the Covenant.

The main purpose of choosing the people of Israel as people of God and ratifying the relationship through a Covenant was that they would bear witness to God among other peoples of the earth. They were to do so by their worship of the true God. The worship was built on faithful observance of precepts of the Covenant. Prophet Hosea had proclaimed that Priests were entrusted with the responsibility of guiding the people to live in accordance with God's Commandments. But unfortunately priests failed miserably in carrying out this all-important task.

The priests tended to equate worship of God with certain rituals. While they had focused a great deal on making celebrations more and more attractive, they had totally neglected teaching peoples the precepts of the Covenant and guiding them in the ways of the Lord. The result was alarming. Grave injustice thrived in society even while celebrations were going on in full swing in the Temple. We can well appreciate the relevance of the message of Hosea who is quite rightly regarded as a priest.

Hosea the Prophet, seeing the laws of the Covenant are being broken, was driven to proclaim, *"Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds and murder*

follows murder. Therefore, the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air; and even the fish of the sea are taken away” (Hos 4, 1-3).

We can perceive the great obstacles faced by the Kingdom of God. When Commandments of God are violated, the consequences are likely to impact the entire universe, which is what is happening today. Who is responsible for these unwelcome occurrences? The response is provided by the Prophet himself.

“Yet let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest. You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night; and I will destroy your mother. My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children” (Hos 4, 4-6).

The priests who were expected to guide people in the ways of God have themselves gone astray, stirring up troubles. The persons who stand accused of this crime and would have to face trial, are not only the Levitical priests but all the leaders, whose job it is to teach and to guide people.

Even as the prophet announces the onset of an impending disaster, he sees beyond the horizon and picks up rays of hope. He explains through a symbolic incident what God will do to the people. The symbolic incident is about a woman who had broken the marriage contract and had turned a prostitute.

“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her...I will betroth

you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD. "And in that day, says the LORD, I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth; and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel; and I will sow him for myself in the land. And I will have pity on Not pitied, and I will say to Not my people, 'You are my people'; and he shall say 'Thou art my God'" (Hos 2, 14-23).

What God desires from His people is total conversion. Various calamities predicted to happen shortly will make them predisposed to embrace the required change. When they lose all that they regard as their own, they will turn to God with their whole heart and soul. The event will resemble their experiences in the desert. The purpose of the impending destruction itself is to inspire total conversion. God will make them capable for the change.

The change of heart is depicted as a dowry the bridegroom gives to the bride. Justice, righteousness, love, mercy and fidelity are needed to know God. God Himself will give that knowledge also as a gratuitous gift. Then they will realize that what God desires is not sacrifice but the knowledge of God: *"I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings"* (Hos 6, 6). This is a lesson applicable at all times and in all places.

Micah B.C. 750-700

Prophet Micah was a contemporary of Hosea, who was known as the Prophet of the love of God. While Hosea was preaching in the northern kingdom of Israel, Micah was preaching in the southern kingdom of Judah. The second half of 8th century B.C. was a time of war and miseries for Judah. Since Judah refused to join the union against

Assyria, Israel and Syria teamed up together and fought against Judah in BC 736-734. The Assyrian army after wiping out Israel and Syria, attacked Judah and inflicted great damage on the country.

Despite wars and disasters, rulers and the rich continued to live in luxury, by exploiting the poor. One of those who had fallen prey to their exploitation and oppression was chosen to be a prophet by God. The message of Micah conveyed the depth of pain he had felt, the warmth of the tears he had shed and the gory sight of the innocent blood he had seen soaked on the streets. His words had the sharpness of a two-edged sword, the strength of a hammer that could crack the rock and the power of fire that would burn down everything to ashes.

“Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil upon their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in the power of their hand. They covet fields, and seize them; and houses, and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance” (Mi 2, 1-2).

Heavy taxes and exorbitant rates of interest on loans have ruined many households. When the poor are not able to pay back the debt, their land and house are confiscated. They are thrown on the streets, having no home or any resources to live on. Many are forced to become slaves again. Such were the happenings among the people of God.

The Prophet exposed the inhuman cruelties inflicted on the poor by the rich and the rulers. *“Hear, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Is it not for you to know justice? -- you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin from off my people, and their flesh from off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces,*

and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron” (Mi 3, 1-3). It is a terrifying picture that Prophet Micah has portrayed, basing on his direct experience of the shattered life of farmers!

Who is responsible for all these miseries? Prophet Micah had no doubt that the culprits were the persons appointed to lead people. It is they *“who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong. Its heads give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for hire, its prophets divine for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, “Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No evil shall come upon us” (Mi 3, 10-11).*

Can we believe that prophets who should communicate the will of God to people, priests who should teach the laws of God and judges who should ensure that justice is upheld are themselves teaming up to exploit people! God will not allow such a situation to continue for long.

“Because of you Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height” (Mi 3,12). After almost a hundred years, Prophet Jeremiah echoed the same feelings (Jer 26, 18). Again, seven centuries later, Jesus pronounced a similar judgment. The people who returned from Babylonian captivity rebuilt the Temple in 515 B.C., and Herod renovated it in 26 B.C., but all was in vain. The Temple was destroyed by the Roman army in 70 A.D. Just a wall remains still, called the “Wailing wall”, to lament over the past.

Though the Prophet had already announced the punishment, he assured the people that they could still avoid it altogether if they would do one thing. What? *“Do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mi 6, 8).* Justice, mercy and humility- this, this alone is what God wants.

Beautifying the temple or adding more celebrations will not please Him. The accusation that “Zion is built by blood” deserves special attention. Exploiting the poor, building luxury homes and holding grandiose celebrations will not please God. In fact, they might bring in great calamities, Prophet Micah has warned. These teachings are valid even today in different aspects of our life, especially in the religious sphere.

What is required is conversion of heart, to live in accordance with the Commandments of God who is the Liberator and Saviour. Conversion has to be such that we are led to living by the principles Jesus has taught us through his own example, such as prioritising the needs of the neighbour over our own. This calls for total change and renewal.

“Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger for ever because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Mi 7, 18-19). Micah makes it clear that fear and despair are not the need of the hour but a firm decision to change the course of our lives.

Isaiah B.C. 750-700

“Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?... Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from

before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool... If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Is 1, 10-20).

Prophet Isaiah is one of the greatest prophets among those who have books in their names, referred to as writing-prophets. He is personally known as the Prophet of holiness. A contemporary of Hosea and Micah, Prophet Isaiah worked mainly in Jerusalem. His preaching lasted for forty years and spread over the rule of four kings in Judah (B.C 740-700). His sermons were continuous cry for justice.

According to Bible scholars, Book of Isaiah, which has 66 chapters, was written over three different periods. Chapters 1-39 belong to Isaiah I (740-700 B.C.); Chapters 40 to 55 belong to Isaiah II (during the last part of Babylonian Exile, 540 B.C.) and Chapters 56 to 66 belong to Isaiah III (after the exile, 520-500 B.C.). Of the three, parts I and III call for conversion and carry warnings that if people fail to change course, great calamities could be expected. Part II, often called the Book of Consolation, is full of messages of hope and encouragement to people who are heart-broken and are drowning in despair. Parts I and III are more related to the discussion here.

Religious Practices and Social Justice

The lengthy quote of Isaiah at the start of this section contains the summary of his teachings. Only if there is justice in society, sacrifices and festal celebrations would

become acceptable to God. The test of justice is protection extended to orphans and widows who represent the lowest stratum of people in a society. The Prophet noticed that situation in society had gone very corrupt and the lowest people were denied justice. In the the name of God, he raised his voice against all such unjust practices.

Isaiah demonstrated through many examples that injustice was the root cause of all of people's miseries. People had forgotten God; they had rejected Him, insulted Him and gone away from Him. These were also reasons for their miseries.

“Why will you still be smitten, that you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they are not pressed out, or bound up, or softened with oil” (Is 1, 5-6).

The Prophet listed all the miseries endured by people living in Judah, such as attack by enemies, destruction of crops, mortal illness, and famine, among others. He spoke of them through symbols, citing numerous examples. One of the main factors behind the miseries of people was the life of luxury indulged by the rich. This had thrown the majority into utter poverty.

“Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land” (Is 5, 8).

This was the first of the ten woes. The remaining nine are reported in Is 5, 9-24 and in Is 10, 1-2. Isaiah starts the list of woes with the parable of sour grapes (Is 5, 1-7). *“Israel is the vineyard of the Lord Almighty; the people of Judah are the vines he planted. He expected them to do*

what was good, but instead they committed murder. He expected them to do what was right, but their victims cried out for justice” (Is 5, 7).

The call of Prophets to people to **change track** fell on deaf ears. Inevitably they had to endure all punishments predicted by Prophets. But God strengthened them and made fresh promises hoping they would change. Alas, no such thing happened. There was absolutely no change in their attitude or conduct. They continued with their old ways, focusing on observance of rubrics, construction and beautification of the Temple, multiplying sacrifices and celebrations while the poor remained uncared for and wallowed in poverty. Indeed, the poor were even forced to sell themselves as slaves (Neh 5, 1-5).

Isaiah III

It was in such a situation that Isaiah III arrived on the scene with stinging words and spiting fire on the leaders. *“The Lord says, “Shout as loud as you can! Tell my people Israel about their sins!” (Is 58, 1).* The Prophet continued to highlight corruption and injustice prevailing among people, due to which, God will not accept their prayers or their fasting. God did not want observance of rituals by people who did not do justice to the poor.

“The kind of fasting I want is this: Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear; and do not refuse to help your own relatives. (Is 58, 6-7).

The Prophet educates us about authentic spirituality which will be acceptable to God and which will stay valid

for all times. Similar message was conveyed by Jesus, who made it the criterion for the Last Judgment (Mt 25, 31-46). These guidelines are applicable to all the religions of the world. But sadly, even after 26 centuries, Isaiah's message continues to be disregarded. Our present-day situation bears more than ample evidence to this sorry state of affairs.

Consequences of Infidelity

Call of God and warnings He sounded through the prophets made no impression on the people. The ten tribes of Israel disappeared from the face of the earth following the attack of Assyria in 721 B.C. A similar tragedy was to befall the southern kingdom Judah. To forestall it, God sent many prophets to the people of Judah to urge them to return to God immediately, but that did not happen.

By the end of the 7th century, Babylon had grown strong. They captured Nineveh, the capital of Assyria and became the unrivalled power in the Middle East. Then they moved west. Judah had hoped to resist the attack of Babylon with the help of Egypt but they did not succeed. In 598 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar, the emperor of Babylon, captured Jerusalem. Thousands, including king Jehoiakim, were taken to Babylon as slaves. Heavy tributes were imposed on Judah. This was the beginning of the Babylonian captivity. The leaders, however, did not learn the lesson.

After about four years, Judah stopped paying the tributes, thinking that Babylon would not come back because the empire was falling apart owing to internal conflicts. But Nebuchadnezzar did come back, not to capture Judah but to destroy it. In 588 B.C. he laid siege to Jerusalem. After a year and a half of besiegement, the city fell. The walls were breached, the palace and the Temple were burned to

ashes. Thousands were exiled to Babylon as slaves. This constituted the second stage of Babylonian captivity.

Many prophets had been sent to warn people about the tragedy that could have been averted and to call them to conversion. Prophet Jeremiah was the most important of them all. There were also other prophets whose messages find in the Bible.

Nahum B.C. 613

Nahum is a prophet who had predicted the fall of Assyria because of atrocities they had committed. By doing so, the prophet had sounded a warning to all. He compared Assyria to a Lion which can tear apart even wild animals. The Lord made the following announcement through the prophet.

“See, I am against you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions; I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the voice of your messengers shall be heard no more. Ah! City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty-- no end to the plunder! The crack of whip and rumble of wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, piles of dead, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end-- they stumble over the bodies! Because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute, gracefully alluring, mistress of sorcery, who enslaves nations through her debaucheries, and peoples through her sorcery, I am against you, says the LORD of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will let nations look on your nakedness and kingdoms on your shame” (Na 2,13-3,5) .

What is significant to note is the assertion made at the beginning and at the end, “I am against you”. God will

regard as enemies all those who, no matter how big they are, deny justice to the poor, oppress and exploit them without any mercy or consideration. This is a warning directed at all those who have lost their sense of justice by their surrender to a consumerist culture. The country was called a harlot because they had rejected God by indulging in idol worship. This is an appropriate title to everyone involved in the worship of mammon, arguably the worst of all idol worships.

Habakkuk B.C 615

Prophet Habakkuk was a contemporary of Prophet Jeremiah. He warns the rich and the powerful about the punishments in store for them for exploiting the poor and the helpless. He also portrays God as someone who sides with the poor. The prophecies made are shown as God's responses to the complaints of the Prophet.

“So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous-- therefore judgment comes forth perverted” This could very well be seen as picture our world today. God responds also to the prophet's complain that God does not react to his laments and pleas. That response God will be totally unexpected and a great surprise.

“Then the Lord said to his people, “Keep watching the nations around you, and you will be astonished at what you see. I am going to do something that you will not believe when you hear about it. I am bringing the Babylonians to power; those fierce, restless people. They are marching out across the world to conquer other lands. They spread fear and terror, and in their pride, they are a law to themselves. “Their horses are faster than leopards, fiercer than hungry wolves. Their cavalry troops come riding from distant

lands; their horses paw the ground. They come swooping down like eagles attacking their prey. "Their armies advance in violent conquest, and everyone is terrified as they approach. Their captives are as numerous as grains of sand. They treat kings with contempt and laugh at high officials. No fortress can stop them - they pile up earth against it and capture it. Then they sweep on like the wind and are gone, these men whose power is their god." (Hb 1, 5-11).

When the Prophet voiced the same complaints with much concern and pain, God assured him that he would receive a response. *"Put it in writing, because it is not yet time for it to come true. But the time is coming quickly, and what I show you will come true. It may seem slow in coming, but wait for it; it will certainly take place, and it will not be delayed. And this is the message: "Those who are evil will not survive, but those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to God" (Hb 2, 3-4).*

God will not let anyone, who persecutes the poor, go unpunished. *"Even the stones of the walls cry out against you, and the rafters echo the cry. You are doomed! You founded a city on crime and built it up by murder" (Hb 2, 11-12).*

In lamentations of the Prophet, we hear the cry of the oppressed who had been thrown on the streets because the lands, on which their homes stood, were taken from them for one purpose or other, for infrastructural development, setting-up of new industry or promotion of tourism. We can hear their cry echoing from the stones of the newly-built luxury mansions. Natural calamities are God's response to the lamentations of the Prophet. No verbal response was necessary. He knows the language that God speaks.

The final message of Habakkuk provides hope to all those who are oppressed and persecuted. *“Even though the fig trees have no fruit and no grapes grow on the vines, even though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no grain, even though the sheep all die and the cattle stalls are empty, I will still be joyful and glad, because the Lord God is my saviour. The Sovereign Lord gives me strength. He makes me sure-footed as a deer and keeps me safe on the mountains”* (Hb 3, 17-19).

Zephaniah B. C. 635 – 630

Prophet Zephaniah arrived on the scene with a harsh condemnation of the people because they had forsaken the true God and had chosen to engage in idol worship. He succeeded in motivating King Josiah to undertake a religious reformation. He awakened the people to the realization that idol worship and injustice would attract dreadful consequences.

“The Lord said, “I am going to destroy everything on earth, all human beings and animals, birds and fish. I will bring about the downfall of the wicked. I will destroy everyone, and no survivors will be left. I, the Lord, have spoken” (Zep 1, 2-3).

These warnings demonstrate how God-man relationship affects the universe. This is a theme which is repeated over and over again in the Bible, from the first pages of the Book of Genesis to the last Book, Revelation. The Prophet castigated the people for their faulty thinking that the Lord would not punish, whatever might be the way they live.

“At that time, I will take a lamp and search Jerusalem. I will punish the people who are self-satisfied and confident, who say to themselves, “The Lord never does anything, one way or the other.” (Zep 1, 12).

Prophet Zephaniah issued a warning about punishment and a call to conversion, intermingling them with prophecies about grave calamities that would befall Jerusalem. The issue was not that observance was inadequate, but corrupted religiosity and injustice that destroys the poor.

“Jerusalem is doomed, that corrupt, rebellious city that oppresses its own people. It has not listened to the Lord or accepted his discipline. It has not put its trust in the Lord or asked for his help. Its officials are like roaring lions; its judges are like hungry wolves, too greedy to leave a bone until morning. The prophets are irresponsible and treacherous; the priests defile what is sacred, and twist the law of God to their own advantage” (Zep 3, 1-4).

Entire leadership is corrupt. Where political rulers, prophets who are supposed to preach the Word of God and priests who are to teach people to walk in the way of the Lord, care only for their own interests, God and His Commandments will be ignored automatically. Worship and celebrations turn into performances that might even be insulting to God. People would be exploited, resulting in a situation, certain to incur God’s wrath.

Prophets, even as they speak about punishments, see a small group which is special and different. *“I will leave there a humble and lowly people, who will come to me for help” (Zeph3, 12).* This refers to a minority, a holy remnant, who would not join the majority in committing evil. It will be through them that Salvation History would advance, virtues would grow in the world and the Kingdom of God would become a reality.

Jeremiah B.C. 626 – 587

“Then the Lord reached out, touched my lips, and said to me, “Listen, I am giving you the words you must speak.

Today I give you authority over nations and kingdoms to uproot and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jer 1, 9-10).

God had chosen young Jeremiah for a difficult mission. He must have been quite young at that point, because he tried to evade God’s call by saying, *“Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth”* (Jer 1, 6). Most Bible scholars are of the view that Jeremiah could not have been more than 16 years old at that time. In fact, Jeremiah was destined to be a prophet even before he was born. God had said to Jeremiah, *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations”* (Jer 1, 5).

God appointed Jeremiah as a one-man army against the kings, princes, priests, prophets and people. *“And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land-- against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land”* (Jer 1,18).

Jeremiah was sent to a people who had been led astray by false prophets and priests. He has to break down their false convictions, wrong priorities, the life style, political and religious structures that are against God’s plan and the role set by God for them. *“See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant”.* (Jer 1,10).

The people could easily understand this language. They could visualize the fortresses and ramparts crumbling, palace being burnt down to ashes, big trees falling by the impact of storm. This is what is going to happen to

the country and to the people, and Jeremiah is entrusted with the task of bringing this about. But this was not the only task. When everything has been destroyed, he has to build it up again, **to build and to plant**”

In the prophetic life of Jeremiah we can see two stages. Jeremiah was called and entrusted with then prophetic mission during the religious reformation of reign of King Josiah who ruled over Judah (B.C.640-609), probably in B.C. 626. The first stage of activities continued till Josiah was killed in battle in B.C.-609.During this period Jeremiah had the full support of the king. Even though the people did not fully accept him, he was encouraged by the support of the king. The prophet recalls this time with great nostalgia. *“Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts” (Jer 15,16).*

To Pull Down

With the death of Josiah the situation totally changed. Now began the second stage of his prophetic activities. Jeremiah was left alone to fight for the religious reform, now against priests and false prophets, political leaders and those who had influence among the people. Terror stricken by vision of impending disasters, Jeremiah desperately tried to lead the people to conversion; he shouted at them, lamented, cried, because he was so frightened by seeing what was going to happen to the country and the people.

“I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled...Because of this the

earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back” (Jer 4,.23-28

The impression given is that earth returned to a stage existing prior to creation (Gen 1, 2). This is a vision of the disaster that would fall upon the world because of the evils committed by man, presented in apocalyptic language. Seeing this, the Prophet frightened; he suffered intense pain *“My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. Disaster overtakes disaster; the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are destroyed, my curtains in a moment. How long must I see the standard, and hear the sound of the trumpet?”* (Jer 4, 19-21. Terrorized by the vision he wanted to abandon his prophetic mission and flee. *“O that I had in the desert a traveler’s lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a band of traitors”* (Jer 9, 2).

He took a resolution, not to speak in the name of God any more, but he could not keep quite. *“If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot”*. (Jer 20, 9). When he opened his mouth, what came out were warnings about dreadful calamities. He announced that the army of Babylon would capture Jerusalem, destroy the Temple and the leaders and the people will be taken to Babylon as slaves (Jer 7, 1-15; 19, 1-20, 6; 26, 1-15). All these calamities fell upon them because they violated the Covenant with God and indulged in idol worship. They committed injustice to the poor and the helpless. The Prophet provided evidence by listing different incidents.

He also reminded them, time and again, about the need for conversion.

“My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jer 2, 13).

People engaged in idol worship and polluted the land. “Lift up your eyes to the bare heights, and see! Where have you not been lain with? By the wayside you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile harlotry. Therefore, the showers have been withheld, and the spring rain has not come; yet you have a harlot’s brow, you refuse to be ashamed” (Jer 3, 2-3).

They committed all sorts of crimes and still pretend to be safe in the House of the Lord. *“Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’ -- only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, says the LORD” (Jer 7, 8-11).*

Jesus referred to these words of Jeremiah in connection with purification of the Temple. Religiosity which has lost its inner meaning, priesthood which supports injustice, and observances and celebrations which do not facilitate renewal of life are not activities that God desires. They would not help them to escape the great calamity waiting to happen.

“Return, O faithless children, says the LORD; for I am

your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion” (Jer 3, 12-14). But the Prophet’s words fell on deaf ears.

“Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth; that I may pardon her” (Jer 5, 1). God has instructed the people through the Prophets, beginning with Amos, that no one can please God without doing justice to the poor and the helpless. Though the message was repeated time and again, the leaders and people did not pay any heed to it. Does the message have any relevance for us today?

Calamity struck with dreadful consequences. They could have avoided the tragic events if only they had listened to the warnings God had given them through the prophets. The Temple where they believed God resided was burned to ashes. The People of God were taken to Babylon to serve as slaves. Warnings of God hold valid at all times. Circumstances and institutions might be different but there is no change in the Word of God.

Who are Responsible for the Disaster?

What is the cause of the disaster? The Bible has stated it time and again. A detailed description is given in 2 Kgs 17, 5 – 23. There are quite a number causes. People broke the terms of the Covenant. They forgot God and involved themselves in idol worship. They also continued with their unjust ways. The reason given for the fall of the northern kingdom, Israel, is as yet valid. To the question, who is responsible for the disaster, the fingers were pointed at the leaders.

The false prophets who told lies in the name of God and the priests who misguided people for material gain are

on top in the list of culprits. *“Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen for you oracles false and misleading” (Lam 2, 14). “It was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed the blood of the righteous in the midst of her” (Lam 4,13).* Like a mother who lost her children, Jerusalem lamented over the calamity, knowing fully well what caused the disaster and who were responsible for it.

Unending Hope

Jeremiah was fully convinced that God will not forsake His people. He preached about the forgiving love of God and the New Covenant God would enter into with them, with the same seriousness with which he had spoken about the impending disaster. The New Covenant will not be written on tablets of stone but on the walls of the human heart. God would give them a heart filled with love of God which will resemble a new creation (Jer 31, 23-37).

The author of the Book of Lamentation offers a message of hope, even in the midst of deep pain and suffering. *“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness” (Lam 3, 22-23).* Unending love and a new heart filled with love of God. The same message was proclaimed by Ezekiel during the start of the exile in Babylon.

“.... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Ez 36, 25-28).

After the Exile

Teachings of prophets Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah II gave hope to people who lived in exile and helped them to safeguard their faith. Cyrus the Persian Emperor, defeated Babylon in 538 B.C. This ended the forced exile of Israelites, as Cyrus granted them permission to return to their homeland.

But those who returned with great hopes, did not find prosperity and happiness as they had dreamt of while in exile. Leaders soon forgot the lessons they had learned from the Babylonian captivity. They tried to re-build the destroyed Temple. When the construction was over, they focused again on rituals. It was a new era, an era without kings and prophets, and the entire authority lay in the hands of Priests.

It was in such a situation that God asked them again, through Isaiah III, to administer justice. The prophet instructed them to put an end to all forms of injustice and to guarantee justice to the poor (Is 58-59). But Prophet's message went unheard. Going one step higher, Priests made sure that no other prophet would step into Israel anymore, because they believed that prophecy had come to an end with the Exile. (Zec 13, 1-6).

Malachi B.C.450

Malachi was the last Prophet, sent to Israel. Malachi is known mostly for his prophecy that Elijah would come before the Saviour (Mal 3,1; 4, 5-6). But even more important is his social critic and call to conversion. The main theme of Malachi's teachings is the distance between worship and social justice.

Prophet Amos had portrayed a picture of God

instructing to shatter the dome of the Temple (AM 9,1). A similar message was given by Prophet Malachi. *“Oh, that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire upon my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand” (Mal 1, 10).*

Prophet Malachi proclaimed in no uncertain terms that God will not accept sacrifices offered if justice is not prevailing in the society. People should come to know the will of God. It was the responsibility of priests to teach the will of God to people.

“For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts” (Mal 2, 7-8).

Priests seemed to be engaged in teaching for material gains and selfish motives, which alienated people and forced them to stray away from the ways of the Lord. Malachi warned that they would have to suffer punishment for misleading the people (Mal 2, 1-3). Things which had been preached by the previous prophets were also taught by the last prophet, especially the truth that injustice and worship of God cannot go together.

Joel

There is no consensus among Bible scholars about the time Prophet Joel preached. Some say that he preached in the fifth century, before prophet Malachi. Indeed, it does not matter when he preached, as the message he proclaimed was no different from that of other prophets. The aim of

his preaching was to call the people to conversion. This was against the backdrop of a disastrous attack by locusts.

People were shocked at the great disaster which had befallen the land due to a great plague. The plague in question was more than a match to the epidemic in Egypt. Locusts ate all that was green in the field.

“What the cutting locust left; the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. Awake, you drunkards, and weep; and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth. For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and without number; ... The fields are laid waste, the ground mourns; because the grain is destroyed, the wine fails, the oil languishes” (Joel 1, 4-10).

What is the solution to this problem? There is just one simple, single answer. *“Turn to the Lord with your whole heart, beg for forgiveness in tears, **change the track** and live in accordance with God’s Commandments”*. Hopefully, priests would lead people on the right path.

“The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD. The fields are laid waste, the ground mourns; because the grain is destroyed, the wine fails, the oil languishes. Be confounded, O tillers of the soil, wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley; because the harvest of the field has perished....Gird on sackcloth and lament, O priests, wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because cereal offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your

God; and cry to the LORD. Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes” (Jl 1, 9-15).

Assembly and prayer in the Temple should be external expressions of our true repentance. Covid-19 should be seen as an opportunity for **changing the track**, and for returning to God. The pandemic is certainly a warning from God. *“Yet even now”, says the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments”. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil” (Jl 2, 12-13).*

Summary

A summary of teachings of all the prophets, from Samuel to Malachi, is to be found in the message of Prophet Joel. Joel urged the people to realize that they had strayed from the path of justice and therefore they should seek God’s forgiveness. From now on, they should get on to the right path, bearing in mind that God values justice, mercy, humility and fidelity. Sacrifices offered, while neglecting the neighbour in need, will not be acceptable to God.

“Like one who kills a son before his father’s eyes is the man who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor. The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood. To take away a neighbour’s living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood” (Sir 34, 20-22).

These admonitions in the Book of Sirach can also be regarded as a summary of the teachings of the prophets. If we meditate over them, we shall be able to realize what

the Lord is telling us through the calamity we are enduring now.

The last word in the Bible is not the word of any prophet or of any saint, but the words and teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus will be the focus of our study in the pages to follow.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

“He also said to the multitudes, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming’; and so, it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Lk 12, 54-56).

People did not pay heed to warnings issued by the prophets, and therefore had to suffer severe punishments. Strangely, despite repeated punishments, they would not **change the track** and take on a new path. Instead of leading a life of justice and mercy, they chose to rely on empty rituals and meticulous practices. John the Baptist was the last of the prophets sent by God to prepare the people for the coming of the Saviour.

The Message of John the Baptist

John the Baptist serves as a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. He came to prepare the hearts of people to accept the Saviour, whose coming was imminent. The Gospels portray John the Baptist as the fulfilment of the prophecies of Prophet Malachi regarding the coming of Elijah (Mal 3,1; 4,5-6) before the arrival of the Messiah. Everything about John, like his conduct, his

garments made of skin and woollen belt, and his speech, resembled those of Prophet Elijah (Mt 3, 4; 2 Kgs 1, 8).

John the Baptist called the people to conversion, to a change of heart because punishment was near. The Messiah would soon arrive and execute God's punishment promptly. The Messiah is presented as coming with an axe, a winnowing fan and a burning torch. People should change their ways without any delay, if they were to escape God's punishment.

“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ...His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Mt 3, 10-12).

John the Baptist conveyed the message as an urgent call to repentance, because this was the very last chance before God's punishment would descend upon them. The fact of being the children of Abraham provided no guarantee, nor would it serve as a shield, to avert God's punishment. Religious practices without commitment to justice are also worthless. No one will be saved by the mere act of getting immersed in the river either. Delaying repentance might prove disastrous.

“You sons of wipers” is how John addressed the Jewish leaders who came to receive Baptism from him. His harsh language was meant to expose the hollowness of their spirituality. The snakes have no ears, which is why John used that symbol to refer to the Jews. According to John, receiving Baptism was not the route to salvation. It is by listening to the Word of God, **changing the track** and starting a new life that we can hope to be saved; baptism is only the sign of conversion.

What should we do then? Evangelist Luke has clearly spelt out the requirements. *“He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise”*. Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, *“Teacher, what shall we do?”* And he said to them, *“Collect no more than what is appointed to you”*. Soldiers also asked him, *“And we, what shall we do?”* And he said to them, *“Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages”* (Lk 3, 10-14).

Justice should be practiced at all the levels of the society. The poor in particular deserve special protection. Officials should be contented with the salary they are paid. No one should demand or accept bribes. Everyone would receive his due and he should learn to be satisfied with it. These are the basic norms of justice. Violations will result in the guilty being condemned to burning in the undying fire, just like a tree which does not bear fruit.

The teachings are plain enough and require no explanation. This was the way John prepared the hearts of people to receive the Saviour. Without following his teachings, no one will be saved, whatever be the number of times he gets immersed in the river.

The Teaching of Jesus

Jesus, on being baptized by John, was anointed by the Holy Spirit who descended upon him in the form of a dove. From the skies above, the Father proclaimed him as His beloved Son. Jesus accepted the mission entrusted to him, to restore the relationships which had been severed by the sin of our first parents. Jesus was fully equipped for this great mission.

The Decision in the Desert

During the 40 days of fasting in the desert, Jesus confronting the temptations, revealed the true nature and purpose of his mission. He rejected all the easy means of redemption proposed by the tempter, such as bread, miracle and political power, and declared that the only way to the redemption of the world is total surrender in obedience to God's plan, manifested through the death on the cross (Mt 4,1-11; Lk 4,1-13).

Jesus admonished that man was not to become a slave of material wealth. The will of God is not to be sought in miracles. Authority is not for domination but service. In the course of the dialogue between Jesus and Satan, Jesus's mission on earth and the way salvation was to be achieved was made clear, and Jesus' commitment to God's plan irrevocable.

The Call

Jesus's first message was a call to repentance and to a change of heart. *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel"* (Mk 1,15). The time of waiting is over; God has started to establish His rule on earth. Open your eyes and see; open your ears and hear; accept the word of God in your heart and change your way of life. Choose a **different track** and organize your life according to the values of the Kingdom of God. This is the essence of the Good News Jesus proclaimed.

The same message was communicated clearly in his discourse at the synagogue in Nazareth, often called the "Nazareth Manifesto" (Lk 4, 16-30). The Kingdom of God refers to redemption God offers to humanity. God's plan

will be executed in this world. Redemption is God's gratuitous gift given to us through Jesus. Believe in your heart, accept the Word of God and obey the precepts contained in the teachings of Jesus. *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"* (Lk 4, 21). Jesus proclaimed liberation at all levels. But people were not ready to accept it. Instead, they tried to stone him to death (Lk 4, 29).

The Teaching

Jesus announced the presence of the Kingdom of God and clarified its nature through numerous miracles. He healed the sick, provided food to the hungry, granted forgiveness to sinners, ensured protection from destructive forces of nature. He raised the dead to life and, most of all, liberated people from the power of Satan. All these miracles are clear signs of the presence of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus taught the Good News with examples from daily life so that even a small child could understand his teaching. He proclaimed that God is a loving Father who loves us all and desires to adopt us as His children. As a proof of his love, He sent His only Son into the world (Jn 3, 6). All that the people have to do is to believe in Jesus and to orient their lives according to His teachings.

Contrary to what John the Baptist had announced, Jesus did not come with an axe and fire to execute punishment, but with a message of love to heal the wounds and to strengthen the weak. He restored their self-confidence by guaranteeing them the position of the children of God and assuring them of God's forgiveness. He taught them that God desires, not obedience born of fear like that of a slave, but love that a child has towards its Father. Jesus even taught them to call God "Father".

The Response of the People

Despite all the love Jesus poured on them, the leaders rejected him just as they had done with the prophets sent to them. Rulers, who had beheaded John the Baptist, regarded Jesus also as a threat to their reign and tried to eliminate Him. From the beginning, religious leaders had viewed Jesus with suspicion. They questioned His actions and teachings, portraying Him as a law breaker. They even made several attempts to kill him.

The common people who were very enthusiastic in listening to and following Jesus, gradually began to show less and less interest. They began to move away from Him. Even the disciples, who had followed Him with ambitions of occupying privileged places in His Kingdom, started to entertain doubts and regrets (eg. Jn 6,60). Jesus, however, warned them about the punishment which was to befall them.

In the course of His public ministry, Jesus carried out a kind of mid-term assessment. He asked His disciples what people thought of Him. They replied that he was regarded as a prophet like Elijah, Jeremiah or John the Baptist. Jesus, then, asked them what they thought of Him. They stayed quiet for a while. Finally, Peter broke the silence and said, “You are the Christ” (Mk 8, 27-30). They had known only this much about Him! Jesus was perceived as the Messiah who had come to re-establish the kingdom of David. That was how the Jews had regarded the Messiah. The disciples, naturally, went along with the same idea.

Jesus, however, apprised them about the second stage of His mission. He spoke of the journey to Jerusalem where He would have to undergo extreme torture and suffering, culminating in His cruel death. He made it clear that only

those were ready to face hardships should follow Him (Mk 8, 31-38; 9, 31-32; 10, 32-34). This was the start of the way of the Cross. His style of teaching changed. His voice grew shrill and harsh. Jesus expressed His sorrow especially about people who had spurned the last opportunity for conversion.

Signs

Jesus provided numerous signs about the coming of the Messiah (Lk 12, 54-56). But people failed to recognize them. Not only the religious leaders but also the common people and disciples had closed their eyes to the happenings around. Words and deeds of Jesus were clear indicators of God entering into history in a decisive way, in fulfilment of prophecies. But strangely, people could neither read the signs nor did they pay heed to His call to repentance.

Jewish leaders sought a special sign from heaven. Jesus told them that proclamation of the Gospel and call to conversion would be the signs (Lk 11, 29-32). Jesus lamented about the cities of Capernaum, Bethsaida and Korazin, which had refused to believe and repent though they had witnessed many miracles (Lk 10, 13-16). The cities stand as reminders to those who fail to recognize things to come, especially the catastrophe in store.

Words and deeds of Jesus were, on one hand, a proof of the presence of the Kingdom of God. On the other, they were warnings about the disasters to come, if people did not convert immediately.

The incidents involving the Galileans who were killed in Jerusalem and the people who perished under the fallen Siloam tower offered additional evidence.

“Unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or

those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Lk 13, 3-5). Repeated warnings by Jesus should have removed all doubts about the impending disaster. One-year time period extended to the fig tree to bear fruit (Lk 13,6-9) should have also conveyed the urgency for repentance.

Disaster at Hand

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Lk 13, 34-35). This reads exactly like the story of the fig tree, to which a grace period of one year was sanctioned to bear fruit!

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, during the early part of the last week of His public ministry, in fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah (Zec 9, 9). People, who had assembled, were excited and shouted aloud together ‘Hosanna’. Disciples were equally excited because they thought that time for re-establishment of the Kingdom of David, had arrived.

But Jesus spoke in a very different manner. *“When he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hiding from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within*

you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Lk 19, 41- 44). This was a warning to people who refused to repent but indulged in celebrations. Failing to recognize the day of ‘visitation’ would bring down total destruction.

The Last Sign

The Temple Authorities had questioned Jesus about driving out merchants from the Temple premises. Jesus responded by throwing a challenge. *“You destroy this temple, and I will restore it in three days” (Jn 2, 18-21).* This was another hint, in fact the last one, that Jesus provided, about his death and resurrection. That was how He would seal the Gospel He had preached with His own blood. But no one was able to read the signs, neither the people who had travelled on the wrong path nor the religious leaders who had misguided them.

Jesus preached for three days in the Temple He had purified. It was the last proclamation of the Gospel and the final call to conversion (Mt 21-23; Mk 11, 11-12). But the proclamation ended, not in conversion, but in conflict. The leaders, who had closed their hearts to Jesus, regarded Him as a false prophet. They also portrayed Him as a blasphemer for claiming to be the Son of God. All these events finally drove them to decide to eliminate Him, an inevitable consequence when people fail to recognize God’s words and deeds

Lamentation of Jesus

Jesus began proclaiming the Gospel with the nine Beatitudes (Mt 5, 1-12) and ends with the seven Lamentations (Mt 23, 13-36). The central theme of the laments is hypocrisy. Jesus reprimands religious leaders

for focusing on rituals and people for following the leaders blindly, without a genuine repentance or conversion of heart. “Woe to you” was not a curse but a lamentation made with a broken heart because He was able to foresee the great disaster which was to befall them. The phrase “How unfortunate” might be more appropriate to convey the meaning. In English, the word “Alas” can also be used, translating the original Hebrew word “Hoy” and the Greek “Ouai”.

Jesus explained why He lamented over the religious leaders. They had attended to external observances and related matters, but had deliberately, so it seemed, neglected to study the implications of the laws in question. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (Mt 23, 23).*

Those who squandered the last opportunity for repentance were forced to undergo punishment. The rebellion which started in the year 64 A.D was put down with an iron hand by Rome. In 69 A.D., they laid siege to Jerusalem. After a year, they demolished the Fort and burned down the Temple. Thousands were exiled and most were turned into slaves. Israel was stripped of its privileged title, “the people of God”. All that remained was the “Wailing wall” which stand as a reminder of the loss and of the folly of people.

Symbol of Eternal Damnation

Destruction of Jerusalem was, without doubt, a monumental tragedy. It was meant to be a warning of what would befall us if we do not respond to the call of God to repent. This has been clearly explained in the eschatological

discourse as well (Mt 24-25). True conversion is returning to God and responding to people in need. God will not value religiosity if the needs of the poor are neglected. Christ Himself has said that at the Last Judgment the question that will be put to us will be, “Did you recognize me when I came to you asking for food?” If you fail to respond to the people in need now, you risk eternal damnation.

This is the lesson Jesus has taught us through the parable of the Last Judgment (Mt 25, 31-46). It is a lesson which will be valid at all times. The way to God is through our neighbour who is in need. To the question, “Who is my neighbour”, we have been given a clear answer through the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10, 25-37) and the parable of the Last Judgment (Mt 7, 21-23; 25, 31-46; Lk 13, 25-27).

We must learn to discern the signs of the times. It is dangerous to delay our repentance. If we do not **change the track** we are moving on, the disaster in store is beyond description. This is the message of Jesus. We are not to lose sight of the day of His visitation. This is an urgent call, deserving our attention and immediate action.

The Early Christian Communities

“The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold” (Acts 4, 32-34).

After the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles

proclaimed the Gospel with great courage. The essence of the Good News is this: salvation has been made available through the death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus.

People who listened to the Gospel message, repented and converted to Christ. Thousands of men and women embraced Christian faith. A new community was formed which reflected the ideals of the Kingdom of God that Jesus had envisaged. The book of The Acts of the Apostles, describes the specific features of the new community in a single verse. *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2, 42).*

The Apostles taught the Gospel Jesus had proclaimed. In the community they shared their faith and everything else they had. The breaking of bread, which is the memorial of the Last Supper, was the centre of their lives. Prayer was the life breath of this community who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, shared everything in common. Sharing, however, was not confined to observance of rituals and ceremonies. They also grew into a cohesive, well-knit family, which was in fact the dream Jesus had about the Kingdom of God. In such a community, all were equals, and everybody enjoyed equal rights, equal dignity. The community was truly a replica of the Kingdom of God.

Over a period of time, however, community life began losing its original spirit as discrimination set in among the disciples. Christian community consisted of Jews and Gentiles, all of whom had accepted Jesus as their Saviour. Gradually, Jewish Christians tended to neglect Gentile Christians, and to regard them as inferior to them. The bias and discrimination could easily be seen, particularly at the time of meals.

“Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6, 1). The Apostles took the complaints of the Gentile Christians seriously. They quickly formed a group called “Deacons” to oversee that justice was done, fairness was shown, and everyone received their due share. As a matter of fact, responsibility for day-to-day administration of the community was fully entrusted to the Deacons so that the Apostles could concentrate on the proclamation of the Gospel.

“The twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6, 2-4).

This is an excellent example of participatory leadership. Responsibilities and services were assigned to different people, thought to be the most competent for the job, and everybody carried out their duties diligently. There was peace in the community, and happiness and satisfaction as well for all. This turned out to be an inspiring model of leadership in the early Christian community.

If there are failures in proclaiming the Gospel and in prayer life, there will also be issues in community life. Problems in one area will find their way into other areas. The success of this early Christian community should inspire us to organize our lives and work in a similar manner. By so doing, we shall be able to live according to the teachings of Jesus and the biddings of the Holy Spirit.

Vision of St. Paul

St. Paul played a decisive role in building up the early Christian Community. Though he was not one of the twelve Apostles, he called himself an Apostle and provided leadership in preaching the Gospel among the Gentiles, assuring them equal status in the Church. The Decisions of the First Universal Council of Jerusalem bear witness to the contributions made by St Paul (Acts 15, 1-29).

St Paul wrote several letters to the local churches he had founded through Evangelization, to provide them timely guidance. Indeed, his letters constitute almost one third of the New Testament. St. Paul followed a uniform pattern in almost all the letters he wrote. In the first part he would explain the doctrine of faith which is the foundation of Christian life. Then, in that light, he would provide directions and suggest corrections which are essential for a true Christian life.

Certain directions which relate to our subject here could be found in many of his letters. (Rom 12, 1-21; 13, 8-9; 1 Cor 11, 17-34; Gala 6, 1-10 and 2 Thes 3, 10-11). Onesimus was a slave who ran away from his master and took refuge with St. Paul. But St Paul returned him to his master Philemon with a letter, which merits careful consideration.

Paul advised Philemon to take back Onesimus, *“no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord”* (Phlm 1, 16). After all, Christians are a community of brothers.

Discrimination at the Dining Table

All those who accept Jesus as their Saviour constitute a

family and become brothers and sisters to one another. This is the attitude which should characterize the society which has been built through the service of breaking of bread, held in various homes. The Dining Table was the basis of community life. But gradually a change could be seen in people's conduct, which prompted St. Paul to convey his displeasure and to offer them the required guidelines.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, St. Paul deals with this in detail. There are two parts to his response. First, discrimination observed at the Dining Table receives severe criticism from him. Second, mention is made about the new Covenant which Jesus has established and which is commemorated through the service of breaking of bread (1 Cor 11, 17-34). Incidentally, this is the earliest mention of the institution of the Holy Eucharist in the Bible. The Gospels were written much later.

On the first day of the week, all those who believed in Jesus Christ would gather at a home and would share a meal together. Everyone would bring the food they had prepared, which would be collected and shared by all. This was the normal practice that was followed. In the middle of the meal, there was the celebration of the breaking of bread in remembrance of the Last Supper of Jesus. Bread and wine were blessed and shared with all present for the celebration. This was in fact central to the Christian fellowship.

In course of time, conflicts arose between the rich and the poor. There was a clear discrimination in the community. The rich got together separately and ate the lavish food they had brought, while the poor had to settle for a meagre meal, often insufficient to satisfy their hunger. This selfish behaviour invited severe rebuke from the Apostle.

“When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his

own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not” (1 Cor11, 20-22).

Vital Medicine could become deadly Poison

After dealing with the conduct which was totally unacceptable, the Apostle continues to speak about the Last Supper of Jesus. The bread and wine we share are the signs of the New Covenant, sealed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Further, St. Paul added that the bread and wine we share in memory of the Last Supper would entitle us to eternal life. But if we participate in the bread and wine with an improper attitude without adequate preparation, the ritual might turn into mortal poison.

“As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (1 Cor 11, 26-30).

In the Holy Mass we receive the love of the One who gave Himself totally. Similar sharing of love should be in our lives too, because it is sharing that would promote growth of the Christian community. There should not be any discrimination. If anyone partakes of the body of Christ which is shared, but is not willing to share his love and what he possesses with those in need, participation will not assure him life with Christ but may bring in eternal

punishment. Hence, everyone is exhorted to engage in a serious examination of conscience.

If an examination of conscience is carried out with sincerity, our Christian communities would realize that they have to be far more just in their ways and have to bear witness to Christ in a more credible manner. But our focus seems to be more on matters like rubrics, dispute about choice of prayers and the posture to maintain while offering Mass. Religious leaders are so much involved in such inconsequential matters that they have no time to devote to crucial concerns like fostering community spirit and building up a sharing fellowship.

In the light of St Paul's criticism, a comment about recent happenings in the Syro-Malabar Church seems appropriate. If religious leaders had been more sensitive to reality and had instructed the faithful in advance, the breaking of bread, which is the centre of our Christian life, would not have become a source of conflict in the community. St Paul's warning seems so very pertinent to the situation. Failing to act rightly can cost us dearly. The bread of eternal life could become poison leading to eternal damnation.

Warnings of St. James

“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have

condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you” (Jas 5, 1-6).

Prophet Amos is known as the Prophet of social justice in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the honour is accorded to St. James. To begin with, St James is one of the twelve Apostles (Mk, 3, 18). He was also the son of Alpheus and a close relative of Jesus. Besides, he was also the Bishop of Jerusalem (Acts 15, 13; Gala 2, 9).

There was a mistaken notion among many that in order to be saved, one needs only to believe in Jesus. The basis for this belief is ascribed to the teaching of St. Paul. *“yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law” (Gal 2,16).* St. Paul was reacting to the exaggerated importance given to the observance of the Mosaic Law, and emphasizing the need of faith in Christ. There are preachers who teach, even today, that in order to be saved all that the faithful have to do is to believe in Jesus Christ. St. James is pointing out that this is not entirely true. He teaches that faith has to be supported by action. He continues to explain what is meant by action.

“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (Jam 1, 22). “If anyone thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man’s religion is vain. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (Jas 1, 26-27). “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead” (Jas 2, 26).

People in want, whether the need is food, drink, clothes or shelter, should be helped and not sent away with empty words of comfort. Words alone will not satisfy hunger. This is not Christian at all. Such behaviour is neither salvific nor acceptable (Jas 2, 14 -25).

St. James's writing is plain and simple, but very disquieting. The wealthy possess gold, silver and expensive garments. They show off their expensive clothes now and then to trumpet their high status and positions. The rich man in the parable wore expensive clothes and partook of sumptuous meals everyday but had failed to notice the poor man who was starving to death at his door step (Lk 16,19).

Some try to amass wealth without paying fair wages to labourers. They try to justify the action by projecting it as the inevitable outcome of the deteriorating economic situation. The Word of God has pronounced the verdict on all such false narratives. Silk dresses eaten by white ants and coins rusted by soil stand as evidence to God's indignation against injustice (Lk 12, 33). The body of the wealthy will be like firewood which would burn without turning into ashes. The Lord will hear the cry of those who were subjected to injustice. Severe punishment awaits those who act without regard for justice and mercy.

Apostle James has issued a stern warning to the Christian community, including those regarded as holy among them, about the discriminatory economic system and the wrongful attitudes which exist in society. Applying it to our day, the pandemic and the resultant economic crisis should be seen as a forewarning about the retribution in store for us. It is high time that we mended our ways in dealing with the poor and the needy.

The call of St. John

John is often referred to “as the disciple Jesus loved”. There are five books in the New Testament which are attributed to him namely, the Gospel of St. John, the three Epistles and the Book of Revelation. The central theme in all his writings is ‘the call to love’ as Jesus loved us to the point of sacrificing his life for us (Jn 13, 34; 15, 12-13). This love should be expressed in action. God’s name itself, revealed through Jesus, is “Love” (1 Jn 4, 8-16). Love of a disciple of Christ cannot just be limited to words alone.

“If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but indeed and in truth” (1 Jn 3, 17-18).

First of all, we should be aware of and accept the truth that all the people in the world are created in the image and the likeness of God, and therefore, all have equal rights. Once this is done, we shall realize that whatever we are and whatever we have, are God’s gifts to us and we are obliged to put them to use according to His will. This is the very essence of a true spiritual life. If, on the other hand, we try to usurp what belongs to others through wrongful means, we shall have to give an account of our deeds to God. What is required is not mere words but genuine love exhibited by sharing all that we have with others, especially with those in need. By doing so, we shall truly bear witness to God’s love before the world.

Challenges and Promises in the Book of Revelation

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride

adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21, 1-4).

The last book in the Bible is known as "The Revelation to John". Many things in the Book are difficult to understand because the Book is written in a literary style, called Apocalyptic. The message is conveyed through symbols. The first part of the book, Chapters 1-3, reports the actual situation of the contemporary churches, whereas, the second part, chapters 4-22, describes Salvation History. Both parts contain criticisms, warnings and promises which are related to the subject under discussion.

Remember – Return

The Book of Revelation, Chapters 2-3, contain messages of Christ to the seven churches in the Asia Minor. The first letter is written to the Church in Ephesus, the most important church in the region. While praising the Church for remaining faithful despite the persecutions they suffered, Jesus draws their attention to a failing of theirs. *"I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first" (Rev 2, 4).* In their enthusiasm to preserve their faith, they seem to have forgotten the most important commandment of Jesus, "Love". Three directions are given to the church.

"Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent" (Rev 2, 5).

Several things had gone wrong with the Church in Pergamum. Faith of the People had been contaminated. Second, unknowingly superstitions and idol worship had infiltrated into their lives. *“I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality. So, you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans”* (Rev 2, 14-15).

Similar problems cropped up in the Church in Thyatira (Rev 2, 20-25). They had lost their zeal for faith which made them equal to being dead but they were not aware of their true situation. Feeling certain that everything was fine, they seemed to be living in a fool’s paradise. *“You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked”* (Rev 3, 17). This stinging criticism is appropriate to our situation too. Even as we are proud of our material prosperity and of our institutions, we are hopelessly unaware of the hollowness within. The Church in Sardis faced a completely different issue, a feeling of illusion about their security (Rev 3, 3-4).

Jesus Christ had only one thing to say to all the churches. *“At least now change your ways”*. Think of the Christian practices which started at the Last Supper, at the foot of the Cross and in the upper room. Wake up and find out the mistakes you have committed, and then **change the track** you are travelling on. Remember, repent and return to the original spirit. Or else, there will be great calamities. The grave consequences of not changing the track are depicted in the second part of the Book of Revelation.

Warnings

After describing a heavenly vision (Rev 5-6), three units of seven disasters as punishment are described, each disaster more terrifying than the previous one. The first septet is related to a scroll sealed with seven seal; the second related to seven trumpets and the third to seven bowls. The scroll represents the history of salvation. As each seal are broken a disaster would happen on earth. Four such disasters are listed, invasion by enemies, civil wars, famine and starvation (Rev 6, 1-8), but none of them brought about the expected repentance. Earthquakes and other frightening phenomena followed as the remaining seals were broken, but they did not produce the desired results either (Rev 6, 12-17).

Then came the second septet with seven trumpets (Rev 8, 1-21). As each angel blows his trumpet calamity visited the earth, hail and fire, pollution of water, darkness, locusts and various pandemics. *“The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot either see or hear or walk; nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their immorality or their thefts”* (Rev 9, 20-21). Hence more dreadful plagues which caused total destruction are being sent, linked with pouring out the seven bowls of God’s wrath (Rev 16).

“The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth. Terrible and painful sores appeared on those who had the mark of the beast and on those who had worshiped its image. Then the second angel poured out his bowl on the sea. The water became like the blood of a dead person, and every living creature in the sea died. Then the third angel

poured out his bowl on the rivers and the springs of water, and they turned into blood. I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, "The judgments you have made are just, O Holy One, you who are and who were! They poured out the blood of God's people and of the prophets, and so you have given them blood to drink. They are getting what they deserve!"

"Then I heard a voice from the altar saying, "Lord God Almighty! True and just indeed are your judgments!" Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to burn people with its fiery heat. They were burned by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God, who has authority over these plagues. But they would not turn from their sins and praise his greatness. Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast. Darkness fell over the beast's kingdom, and people bit their tongues because of their pain, and they cursed the God of heaven for their pains and sores. But they did not turn from their evil ways" (Rev 16, 2-11).

We see today the calamities reported in the Book of Revelation through various symbols happening one after another. Pollution of air and water, pandemics, great plagues, bursting volcanoes, and damage of crops should all be viewed for what they are, as warnings. But those, chosen with the mission of leading the people, themselves seem lost and are groping in darkness. Political leaders who had promised to fix everything appear busy amassing wealth for themselves. They have failed to recognize God's warnings in various places, including religious spheres. The same thing seems to happen with many religious leaders as well.

Light of Hope

After presenting the warnings and frightful punishments, natural calamities and man-made wars, God guides us to a place of light and hope. It is on this hopeful note that the Book of Revelation ends. God will renew everything and a new world would emerge in which God would dwell in the midst of people. The earth will become the abode of God. All will experience the love of God who is Father and Mother. There will be no more fear, illness, death or separation, no sadness or crying (Rev 21-22). All are children of God and so brothers and sisters to one another. Everyone will become one with God who is Father, Mother, Brother and Friend. This will be the eternal joy.

It is with this the Bible, a collection of 73 books, concludes. This is neither a day-dream of the cowards, nor the opium of the oppressed. Only those who are willing to love others to the extent of risking their own lives will be allowed entry into this world (Rev. 21, 8). Those unwilling to do so will be thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur (Rev 20, 15)! Everyone is free to choose what they want. However, God wishes all to be with Him in the New Heaven and the New Earth.

Conclusion

“Why will you still be smitten, that you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint” (Is 1, 5).

The Entire world has been terrorized and life has been brought to a standstill by a tiny virus called Corona or Covid 19. The stock markets crashed. The share prices fell. The world economy is in doldrums. The financial structures have collapsed. Health care centres have become dysfunctional. Tourism has suffered immensely. Amusement parks continue to remain closed. Church festivals, Temple celebrations and National events in which tens of thousands of people generally participate have been either cancelled or being conducted in a low-key manner with a limited number of persons.

With the passage of days, Corona is becoming stronger and more virulent, posing a challenge to the pride and power of man. The structure of the virus keeps mutating, rendering the man-made vaccine either totally ineffective or effective just temporarily. With businesses lying shattered, the differences among people have flattened. In front of Corona, suddenly all seem to have become equals, rulers and the ruled, subordinates and superiors, slaves and masters, the blacks and the whites. Everyone is wary of the virus and feeling powerless before its deathly prowess.

What is the Lord telling us through this terrifying, unprecedented situation? We have been looking for answers in the Bible, the Word of God. The Bible story begins with man's fall and punishment inflicted on him for desiring to become equal to God by eating the forbidden fruit. There were several more transgressions and punishments, before the final disaster. The Bible ends with the hope of God establishing a New Heaven and a New Earth. Here are some of the insights gained from the Bible.

1. Man must know his limitations and accept them

Man is neither God nor the owner of anything. He is just a creature of God with limitations which he needs to recognize. Pretending to be all powerful and wishing to fulfil all of his whims and fancies will prove counterproductive.

Corona has made man realize that he is living in an uncertain world, with an over-sized ego and a tiny bag of abilities. From the beginning of time, man has been waging wars, first with sticks and slings, thereafter with spears and swords, later on with guns and tanks, and in the recent times, with missiles and bombs. He has been fairly successful all along. But now, he seems to have met his match, in the form of a virus, the Corona Virus and he is clueless as to how to deal with it. He has no ready weapons or remedies at hand.

In the midst of this huge crisis, a disturbing story has entered into the global discourse. Man has come to regard every other man as his enemy and therefore he is intent on eliminating the others by any means, fair or foul. It is strongly rumoured that the Corona virus did not descend from the skies, but was created in a Laboratory in China for

use as a weapon of mass destruction. The target is people of enemy countries. Is this the truth?

This is the age of scientific research, discoveries and innovations. Man has invented machines to calculate anything and everything. He has also developed artificial intelligence which is thousand times more powerful than the human brain. What will be the next invention? The next development? If robots assume full control of the society, what would happen to man?

Man has come to believe that he can create whatever he wants. There are people who hold the view that the Universe came into existence with a “Big Bang”. Accordingly, efforts are on to create another world with a “Great Bang”. Ambition knows no limits. Here it may be useful to recall the soliloquy of God who came down to see the great tower man had created. *“Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (Gen 11, 6).*

That we are mere creatures with limited ability has been driven home through numerous events recorded in the Bible. The loss of Paradise, the Great Flood which wiped out all the living creatures, the story of the Tower of Babel which resulted in people getting scattered all around the globe, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; all the episodes illustrate clearly man’s inherent limitations.

2. Whatever we have are gratuitous gifts from God

What I am and all that I have are gratuitous gifts of God. I can make no claim to anything in me. As it is said, “but for the grace of God”, I couldn’t be existing on earth. My life is a pure blessing. Therefore, is there any need to

emphasize that I have to be grateful to God, the Creator of all that is?

3. Have an understanding of our mission – fulfil that mission

God has a specific plan for every person, every society and for the entire humanity. *“I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer 29, 11)*. What is my role in God’s scheme of things? Everyone has to discover his mission. Whosoever you are, whether a king, a priest, or a prophet, everyone has a mission which demands fulfilment. Recognition of this mission is essential for all, political rulers, religious leaders, parents, teachers, social workers and everyone involved in maintaining discipline and order in society. It is the Lord who has entrusted this task to us and we would have to present an account of our life and work before Him .

4. Respect relationships

The Universe exists and functions through an interplay of complex, mutual relationships. From the milky ways and the planets to the atoms and the minute particles, everything operates on the basis of its relationship with the others in the world. Relationships are maintained through natural laws established by the Creator. If laws are violated, planets would collide with each other and perish together.

Laws affect human life as well because human beings too depend on their relationship with each other for their existence. Every person must maintain his relationship with God, with other people, with the universe and with one’s own self. What he is required to do has been made

known to him through the precepts of the Covenant. Any rupture in this relationship is sure to impact all human beings and the universe itself adversely.

5. Internal attitude is more important than observance of rubrics

Observance of rubrics does have a role to play in maintaining equilibrium and balance of powers in the universe, as also in safeguarding the welfare of human beings. However, true spirituality cannot be equated with, or limited to, some rituals. It is man's basic attitude to life which uplifts his relationship with God, with his fellowmen, with the universe and with his own self. Any discrimination based on colour, caste or social, religious and economic status, is contrary to true spirituality. In other words, religiosity is not a matter of rituals and ceremonies but is founded on the practice of values such as love, justice, mercy, humility and fidelity. Without these values, there cannot be any God-man relationship.

6. Learn to say enough

Consumerist culture is clearly getting out of hand. People are not satisfied with what they have or with what they earn. They are craving for more goods and gadgets, clothes and ornaments. It is time that we learn to be happy with having our basic needs met. There is no place for greed. Greed can never be satiated. It is a blessing not to be too fond of material prosperity. Wisdom is recognizing where my rights end and where my neighbour's rights begin. There is more joy in giving than in receiving. Contentment with what we have is essential for joy and satisfaction in life.

7. Change Track

We can no longer carry on with our lives the way we have been doing thus far. Covid-19 has issued a warning to the world that a course correction is an immediate must for survival. The horrors of the pandemic should be seen for what they are, as signs of God's disapproval of our conduct. Nothing less than a radical change in our attitude, behaviour and relationships would be adequate to ward off the crisis.

Earth should be viewed as our mother and people of the world as brothers and sisters. We must not take more than what we require for our needs. Our neighbour is not an enemy but a friend and an associate. Religious bigots should retrace their steps to the original spirit of their faith. The Hindus chant "*Om Shanthi, Om Shanthi*", Wishing peace to all. The Muslims cry out "*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar*" meaning God is almighty, and call themselves as instruments of peace. The very name Islam stands for peace. The Christians greet others, saying "*Peace be with you*". So beautiful and profound salutations! They all contain the same message, the message of peace, joy and brotherhood. This is what should dominate our discourse all day, at all times and in all places. For us, Jesus Christ, the king of Peace, stays on as the centre of our lives.

Possibly this is the message that God wishes to convey to us through the Corona Virus, which has created a havoc in the world. Return to the Lord with a contrite heart and seek forgiveness from earth and from our brethren. "*He has told you O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*" (Mi 6, 8).

We shall then be able to hear the voice of our Lord.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21, 1-4).

At least from now on, we shall listen to the voice of the Lord and throw open our hearts to the poor and the needy. We shall **change the track** and walk on the path of God.

Corona-19 will pass away, sooner than later, but we should never forget the lessons we have learned. May God bless us all and keep us safe!



