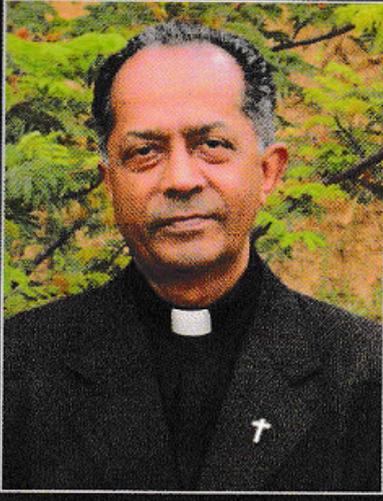




# FEAR NOT

MICHAEL KARIMATTAM

Translated by: Glorista Arakal SABS



# “ABBA”

## The Prayer Jesus Taught

Dr. Michael Karimattam

*“He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him. “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Lk 11, 1).*

Since it is the prayer Jesus taught it is called “The Lord's Prayer”. This is the most popular prayer among Christians. Mathew and Luke have recorded this prayer. Both evangelists introduce the prayer with the preface “Pray like this”. The Lord's Prayer is a model for praying.

Though learned by heart and repeated many times a day, it can happen that one does not understand its depth or pay attention to the truth the prayer contains and the message it conveys.

This prayer, in fact, contains the sum total of Christ's teaching about faith and morality, as in a nutshell. After addressing God “Our Father”, the prayer places seven requests before Him. All these eight points are studied in detail in this book.

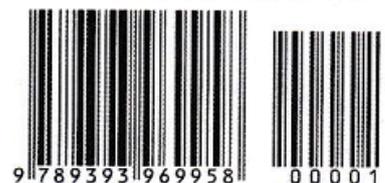
Regardless of cast and creed, all those who believe in God could find a model for prayer, inspiration and source of strength in the Lord's Prayer. When we call God “Abba” we become aware that none of us are orphans. We have a common Father, and as His children all are brothers/sisters to one another. The Lord's Prayer could help create such a conviction and develop universal brotherhood.

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Scripture

FEAR NOT

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Michael Karimattam



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2018



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Michael Karimattam

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## FORWARD

Fear is an emotion that affects all areas of human life. The bible tells us that the first experience of fear came as a consequence of sin, namely, breaking the commandment of God. Precisely because of that the powerful message Jesus, the redeemer of humanity, gives is FEAR NOT!

The seed of fear lies dormant in every sin. At the same time the bible repeatedly tells us not to be afraid. It is often said that such an assurance given by God is reported 365 times in the bible; that is one each for every day. This statement should not be taken literally; it is only intended to emphasize God's reassuring and consoling presence in our lives, always and everywhere.

This book has picked out 32 such assurances from both the Old and the New Testaments. What is given here is not a scientific analysis of bible passages, but reflections on the Word of God, studying each occurrence in its original context and seeking their relevance for us today. Some personal experiences of God's protection in situations of serious danger are also narrated in order to bring out the meaning and relevance of the Word of God.

The articles in this book were published in the monthly called Vachanolsavam, over a period of three years. The appreciation and requests from people of different walks of life has been a motivation to bring out this book. I am very grateful

to Fr. Zacharias Edat VC, the chief editor of Vachanolsavam first of all for encouraging me to write these articles and then granting permission to publish it as a book. Sincere thanks are due to Sr. Gloria SABS who translated these articles from the original Malayalam and to Fr. Mathew Perumpally for reading the translation and suggesting necessary corrections. Heartfelt thanks also to Fr. Xavier Vadakekara OFM Cap, Director of Media Publications Delhi, and to his staff for bringing out this English edition.

## 1 DO NOT BE AFRAID



*“What shall I render to the LORD for all his bounty to me?”  
(Ps 116, 12).*

It happened 48 years ago, to be exact on 16 July 1969, at 4:00 PM. Never, before or after, have I experienced such fear in my life. After my priestly Ordination, I was studying at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. We had vacation during the months of July, August and September. During those months, to meet our study expenses, we would go to the parishes in Germany to substitute pastors on vacation. Usually the pastors would take a month off and that gave us students a

chance to earn some cash and also an opportunity to improve our knowledge of the German language. This is how we used to spend our vacation time, while studying in Rome.

In Bavaria, in the southern part of Germany, there is a region called Frankische Schweiz (Switzerland of the Franken). Maybe it is called so, because of its geographical similarity to Switzerland. This area comes under the diocese of Bamberg. There is a parish in the small town called *Waishenfeld*. I went there to replace the vicar, Fr. Hans Volker, who had gone for his summer vacation in the beginning of July. It was my first visit to the area. Soon, some enthusiastic young people became my dear friends. They were eager to show me the beautiful places in the area. One of the locations they took me was the “Devil’s Cave (Teufelshoelle)”, near the town of *Pottenstein*. It was a beautiful cavern under the earth. There were natural caves and tunnels filled with various mineral formations. The mineral drops mixed with calcium carbonate, dripping down from the roof of the cave slowly solidified and hung like upturned pillars. The drops that fell on the ground grew like huge candles. A thousand years were needed for such formations to grow a centimeter, I was told. I was also told that this cavern was more than forty million years old. The pillars hanging from the roof were called “Stalactite” and the ones growing from the bottom were called “Stalagmite”. Electric bulbs with various colors added splendor to the natural setting. As I entered the cavern, I felt like I was in a beautifully decorated Cathedral. The place was a popular attraction for tourists.

As we left the cavern, my friends told me that, there was a cave, even more beautiful, near our Church. Not many have seen it and there were no guards posted to protect it. They volunteered to show it to me, if I so desired. This offer was put forward by Seger Hans, the owner of the motor vehicle

workshop in the town. Alois Bernard, who was just back from Kenya where he had served as a social worker, agreed to join us. They were two strong young men, more than six feet tall and each weighing more than 100 Kilos. Why should I fear when I have such mighty body guards to protect me? Besides, fear was a feeling alien to me at the time. I liked the idea and we set the date to visit the place in the afternoon of July 16<sup>th</sup> the Feast day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. It is dark in the cave and so one of my friends took a head light and the other one a torch light. They provided light for me who was going in the middle. Hence I did not take any source of light with me.

Upon arriving at the mouth of the cave, I wondered how we could get inside as there was an opening only about two feet wide. I had no idea what was inside and nothing could be seen in the light of the torch. When I stood there perplexed, Hans asked me if I was scared. I was not scared but wondered how to get inside, I said. They laughed as I was so small; my body was not even as thick as their thigh. Hans crawled into what looked like a narrow tunnel with the head light on. I followed. Behind me came Alois. When we crawled about 20 feet the cave became about four feet in diameter and we could walk bending. As we continued, the cave became more spacious. I felt elated and safe between the two friends with lights in their possession. We went around for half an hour enjoying the beautiful sights in the cave. Now it was time to return.

On the way back I noticed something I had not seen while going in. There was something what looked like a deep well in front of me. Somehow, on the return trip I ended up behind the two friends. They went across this abyss very easily. Next was my turn! They stood on the other side and showed the light to me. In the light, I saw the magnitude of the abyss I had to cross. I froze! It was like a crater about four feet wide

and over thirty feet long. I had no idea how deep it was! The bottom was not visible with the light. I dropped a stone, no sound came back. The way one had to cross this abyss was frightening. Standing on the edge, that is less than a foot wide, and holding on to the slanted wall of the abyss one had to drag the feet forward. In this position, the deep abyss was under my feet. If the hands or feet slip, that will be the end of me. I imagined myself slipping and falling into the bottomless pit and end up like Korah and company, the rebellious priests, whom the earth swallowed (Num16).

While going in, in the middle of my two friends, I had crossed it easily, without a second thought. Now I was left behind. If I slip, my friends will be able to do nothing to help me. I stood there shaking, staring at certain death in front of me. Suddenly I felt dizzy. My eyes were blinded. I could hear nothing my friends were saying. I was shivering head to toe. At any moment I could slip and fall into the deep abyss. I could not move back or forth. I stood there completely frozen! All kinds of thoughts flashed through my mind. Why did I dare to take such a risk? This was a situation I myself created. I should have been more prudent. Was it to end up in this bottomless pit that I was sent to Rome to study? Accusations shot at me from all sides of my mind. That made me even weaker. What can I do? How can I escape from this death trap? Who can help me? By then, my friends also became scared. Probably they figured that it was my end. They might have been wondering how to lift my body from the bottom. There was no way out! The only way open in front of me was down into the abyss!

I was about to surrender to the inevitable end. I prepared myself to encounter my last moment on earth. Suddenly something happened. I heard a voice deep in my heart, telling me, "Fear not, I am with you!" I stopped shaking. My arms

and legs became strong. My eyes opened. Then I heard Hans shouting, "Open your hands and press the palms against the wall. Then, slowly move your feet forward". Following these instructions I crossed the abyss easily. My life was not to end in the bottom of an unknown cave in Waishenfeld, a remote village in Germany. I became deeply aware of the fact that God had a plan for my life and that was not for my ruin, but for my welfare. It was not for my death but for my life. I was filled with joy and gratitude! ***"What shall I render to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord; I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people"*** (Ps 116, 12-14). I had almost lost my life and that due to my own carelessness and needless risk taking. An overwhelming feeling of guilt shook my whole being.

However, the Lord stretched out his mighty arm and saved me from the depth of the abyss. No words of accusation or rebuke. Not even a word of reproach. I was filled with a deep awareness of the presence of the Lord in my life. The voice I heard was from my Lord who loves me and guides me every moment of my life. He is my Father and Mother, Brother and Sister, and ultimately my constant companion and friend.

## 2 TERRIFYING NAKEDNESS



*“I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself”*

(Gen 3,10).

It is interesting to note that the first reference to fear in the Bible is related to the Paradise. There was a time when man was filled with all kinds of joys and comforts of life. He was friendly with all living creatures. As helper and companion, he had a woman who was part of his flesh and bone. It was a situation when both of them were living blissfully in the presence of God. They enjoyed their work in the Paradise of which they were also the keepers. They could even walk with God, maybe exchanging pleasantries. Man had such deep and loving relations with God. Why, then, should he feel afraid when hearing the footsteps of the Lord?

The ‘fear’ mentioned here should be analyzed in the context of the statement of the sacred writer, “The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gen 2,25). They suddenly had a new awareness, a new realization, some new knowledge – they were naked. The sacred writer makes a distinction between being naked and being aware of it. Being naked in itself is not anything to be ashamed of. God, who had created all things for good, is the one who gave different physical figure to man and woman and gave the various parts their separate shapes and tasks. Naturally there does not have to be anything shameful in the body. Then, why this shame and fear and why this desire to hide the nakedness?

Shame appears when something moves from the state of mere being to the state of awareness. Awareness comes from some new knowledge. What is the source of that knowledge? It is an act of disobedience, breaking God’s commandment. It is here where shame and fear converge. The second question God asks the hiding man throws more light into this. “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Gen 3,11). Here the problem is not the physical nakedness but the breach that happened in man’s relations with God. Therefore we ought to carefully look into what the Scripture says about the command of God and the circumstances in which man disobeyed by.

The problem is related to *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. “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 2,17). This was the command. Only when we take of the garden, tree, fruit, eating, serpent, woman, etc. as symbols used to reveal some deeper truths, can we grasp the meaning properly. The sacred author, known as Yahwist, has used a literary style which presents divine truths in the form of a story. In Chapters 2-4 of Genesis, this style is used throughout.

In the official document known as ‘*Dei Verbum* No. 12’, the II Vatican Council has asked all those who interpret the Bible to give special attention to the literary forms used in different parts of the Bible.

Here the focus of attention is not just any particular tree or fruit. On the contrary, the focal point here is whether man will accept the commandments of God and live accordingly or he will live as he pleases. Eating of the tree of “good and evil” means placing one’s preferences as the criterion for good and evil. Whatever I like is good; whatever I don’t like is evil. In short, the yardstick for good and evil is my liking. That means the basis or morality is not God and the commandments he has given, but simply the preferences of people. It is here where the tap-root of sin appears.

Everything was fine when Adam and Eve lived in accordance with the will of God. There was perfect unity, between man and God, man and man, man and the flora and fauna and man with himself. It was this all-pervading harmony that was the essence of the Paradise where, there is freedom, there is joy; there is no place for any fear here. It was the power of evil, symbolized by the serpent that injected the feeling into man that living according to the will of God is some kind of slavery that negates freedom. By extolling the virtues of the forbidden fruit, and depicting God as a selfish, lying despot, the power of evil was able in his machinations to create doubt and conflict in the mind of man.

The serpent told Eve that whatever God said about the fruit was a lie. God had said that the one who ate the fruit would die. The serpent told her that by eating the fruit not only won’t she die but her eyes would be opened to see clearly good and evil. The assertion of the serpent seemed more acceptable to her than the word of God. She decided to make a test. She ate

it first and gave it to her man. Who ate it first does not matter as it does not affect the essence of the message. The story has a certain background, especially from the Canaanite religious beliefs and practices. The fact that women are more interested in religious matters, the snake worship was prevalent among the Canaanites, worship of Baal and cultic prostitution and the priestesses engaged in such practices - all these should be taken into account while interpreting the biblical story of the first temptation and fall.

Adam and Eve immediately realized that what the serpent said was true, to an extent. When they ate the fruit, their eyes were definitely opened. Soon they realized that what the serpent said was only half the truth. Half-truths are even more dangerous than blatant lies. Their eyes opened and they received a new awareness and got some new knowledge. The new knowledge was the realization that they were naked. When their eyes opened, from the state of being naked they got into the awareness of their nakedness and this made them not happy but ashamed. Until now they were unaware that they were naked and they mixed freely like innocent children, but now they were reluctant and ashamed to look at each other. A kind of fear gripped them. Their vain efforts to cover their nakedness by sewing fig leaves together draw our attention to the source of their fear.

It is not the bodily shape or form that is the cause of shame and fear. It is the state of the mind. They lost the harmony that was the Paradise. The equilibrium was upset. Even before they were driven out of the Paradise, they had lost it. The cross examination and judgment that follow are merely an explanation of this state. They did not lose Paradise because they were cast out from there. The moment they turned recalcitrant and breached the order given to them by God, they were outside the Paradise.

In the hearts that were brimming with joy and freedom, now there was fear. Until now Adam and Eve had felt they were one. But now in the place of that unity, that oneness, there was suspicion, anger and mutual accusation. This is very clear from the reply Adam gives God, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate” (Gen 3,12). He is not willing to accept his sin; on the contrary, he is trying to put the blame on his companion and finally on God himself. The usual game of passing the buck!

The fig leaves could hardly hide the nakedness of Adam and Eve; Shame and fear overpowered them. When the writer of the Genesis describes this incident, he reveals to us the basic reason for the fear and shame of our first parents. Disobeying the order of God is the reason for their embarrassment. Nakedness becomes a matter of shame because of sin. In the life ahead, they will be constantly faced with these two adversaries – shame and fear. However, God himself gives solutions to overcome their problem. In place of the fig leaves, which could hardly cover their nakedness, God gives them garments of skin. That is also a symbol. God acknowledges their sinful state. He does not reject them outright because they had sinned. In the garments of skin we also have the indication that God will himself solve the problem created by their loss of grace and self-respect.

The sinner fleeing to hide is not abandoned by God. God comes after him, holds his hand and helps him to walk back into grace and dignity. He will lead him back to the Paradise. He repeatedly tells us, “Fear Not!” and thus reassures us of his forgiveness in spite of our grave sins. We can hear this in the tender reassurance in, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23,43).

The Bible repeatedly makes it clear that fear is the inner

feeling that the sinful man has when he stands before God who is holy. By breaking the Commandments, man loses his divine graces. With that the cordial relations with God are rudely shaken. When man loses the apparel of divine grace, he is tormented with the feeling of shame and fear. The garments of skin that God gives to the embarrassed first parents are the beginning of the flow of divine graces into us, who too are embarrassed by our shame and fear brought upon us by our sin.

Basically, it is through Jesus that the divine grace that removes shame and fear flows into us. This grace is called ‘white robes’ in the Bible. Those that “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7,4) are the people who have received that grace. The divine grace will free them from their shame and fear. There is only one thing we have to do to overcome the shame of nakedness, emanating from sin. It is made clear in the Letter sent to the Church in Laodicea, ***“I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see”*** (Rev 3,18). We have received the white robes through faith and baptism. They were made available to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The white dress given at the time of baptism is a symbol of this grace. As long as we wear it, we don’t have to be embarrassed or afraid. But the moment we break the Commandments, we soil and stain our white robe of divine grace. In that case, we have to endeavor harder with greater fear and trembling to work out our salvation (Phil 2,12).

### 3 SEAL OF PROTECTION



*“The LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him”*

(Genesis 4,15).

God put the seal of protection on Cain who was crying with fear saying that anybody who met him would kill him. His fear was not unfounded. The reason for the fear of Adam, the father of mankind, was breaking God’s commandment. Adam wanted to be like God. His sin gave him the feeling of nudity and shame. But Cain’s, the first born of Adam, the cause for fear was the blood stains of his brother on his hand. The Bible doesn’t make it clear what exactly was the cause for Cain’s killing of Abel. However the deeds of Adam and Cain revealed the two sides of sin. The sin of Adam was recalcitrance, breaching God’s commandment. It led him to the sense of shame, fear and hiding. The sin of Cain is denying one’s brother. In describing the results of both the sins and the reaction of God, the writer of the Old Testament shows an essential difference.

As soon as the first parents ate the forbidden fruit, they felt the sense of sin. Their efforts to cover their waist, their nudity, and to hide make that clear. However the deed of Cain doesn’t seem to have brought about any immediate repercussion. The one who commits fratricide reacts as if nothing serious has happened. Even when God questions him, he doesn’t exhibit any fear or sense of guilt. On the contrary he reacts with a quick repartee. God asks him, “Where is your brother, Abel?” To this question Cain responds, “I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” This repartee contains not only a lie but pride and stubbornness. Only when he was shocked with the sentence for his crime he realizes the intensity of his crime. This realization pushes him into a terrible state from where there is no redemption.

“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 will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the

earth” (Gen 4,11-12). It is this judgment of God that made Cain aware of the seriousness of his crime. This sense of guilt pushed him into the bog of fear and it is from there he cries “Everybody who sees me wants to kill me”. God had not fully abandoned Adam. In the same way he did not abandon Cain fully. To Adam who had hidden himself because of his shame God gave a dress of skin. Here God gives Cain a sign to save him from any attack (Gen 4,16). The sign placed on him is the seal of protection that God gives to the murderer.

People often ask questions like these: What is this sign? What is its source? What is the meaning of God putting a sign on Cain? Can this be imagined as a sign placed on his forehead so that everybody could see it? It is something like branding. Marking or putting a sign on something or someone, means establishing one’s ownership on the branded thing or person. The order which has the seal, mark, of the king has authority. When, on the front door, a name is written, it shows who the owner is. Thus the person with a sign of his forehead declares that he is of the person who has branded him. If God put a mark on Cain, then Cain belongs to God. He stands under the protection of God. One who troubles him, torments him, is troubling God. It will attract severe punishment. The Word “Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance” (Gen 4,15) is a forewarning of impending punishment. It has been explicitly stated that God put a mark on Cain so that nobody should harm him.

When we think of this mark, we think of the custom that was prevalent, and is still so, among many Tribal groups. After a few days of the birth of a child, his forehead or cheek is very slightly pierced with a sharp knife. This is the sign of the Tribe. Each Tribe has its sign. This sign is like an identity card. The person bearing the mark will have the protection of the entire tribe or clan. If anybody tries to harm him, the entire tribe will

come to protect him and avenge him. The author of the Bible thinks that God must have branded Cain presaging this Tribal custom.

By marking or branding, ownership is established. It ensures protection. There are some occasions in the Bible where God asks people to make certain marks to get protection. They also will throw light on why Cain was marked. We see such a marking in the Book of Ezekiel. God sends his angel to warn the people of the punishment he is going to give them for their abominations. “The LORD called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing-case at his side, <sup>4</sup>and said to him, ‘Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it’” (Ez 9,3-4). After the marks have been made, other messengers with lethal weapons come and drag away all those without marks. In this vision the Prophet had, the mark on the forehead indicates the protection given by God.

Such an incident is also seen in the Book of Revelation. There, from the twelve tribes of Israel, 12,000 persons from each tribe were sealed by the messenger of God to protect them from the impending torments (Rev 7, 1-8). By specifying 12 Tribes and 12,000 persons from each tribe, we are assured that God will protect his people at all times. The 12 Tribes are symbolic of the whole of God’s people. This shows that the people who are sealed will always be safe even during religious persecutions. The persecution can only affect the body, but those sealed enjoy god’s protection and will live with Him forever.

In the Book of Revelation there is another mark made by an animal which is against this kind of protection by God. The animal that forces the mark on the forehead and hand of persons is symbolic of the devilish power that torments the

people of God (Rev 13,16-18). Those who get the mark declare their loyalty to the animal. They are under the protection of the animal. They won't be tormented in this world. But ultimately they will be victims of eternal punishment like the animal who branded them (Rev 14,9-11; 16,2; 19,20; 20,4). From all this it is clear that marking means making things or people one's own.

Apart from the mark on the forehead, there is reference to a mark in the Bible, especially the New Testament. This mark is made in the heart or soul of man. Here the mark is the gift of the Holy Spirit that has been given to us through the Risen Lord. God has anointed us "by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment" (2 Cor 1,22). When a deal is made, often an advance is given as a token of assurance of going ahead with the deal. The one who has given the advance is obliged to give the remainder within a stipulated time. The Holy Spirit has been given to us as advance. That is what is meant by God who has put a seal on our souls. All those who have received such seals are God's own and their salvation is assured.

The same idea is presented more clearly in the Letter to the Ephesians. "In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory" (Eph 1,13-14). God considers us as his own. We all are in his ring of protection. This idea is made clear in the teachings of the Church which assert that sacraments are the seals that put a mark on our souls. Three sacraments, Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Order, are specifically designated as sacraments putting indelible marks on the souls. These are sacraments which can be received only once and can't be repeated. Through baptism, one gets partnership in the salvation and divine life which Jesus gives.

Confirmation gives us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Order makes one participate in the service ministry of the Lord. They all are marks that show proximity to God.

In this background what would be the meaning of the mark that was put on Cain? It is obvious that it is not like the mark made by the sacraments. But, at the same time, the writer says it indicates the protection given by God. What is so revolutionary here is the teaching that even a man who has committed fratricide is protected by God. The mark is given so that nobody should kill Cain. If somebody troubles him, God will avenge seven times. Does it mean that God has given Cain the license to kill again? In that case, how will there be safety in society? Who can live?

This question is answered in the Bible by presenting the law of limited vengeance. "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed" (Gen 9, 6). This law of vengeance calls our attention to the law of life that came after the Deluge. This law reminds people that nobody should hurt his neighbor without fear of retaliation. For this, also there is a limit, and that is fixed by the next law on vengeance. Life for life, eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth ... (Ex 21, 24-27). From all this it is clear that God did not place a mark on Cain to make him think in a grossly foolhardy and stubborn manner that he can go on committing any crime without being afraid of retaliation or punishment.

But even this law of vengeance is later rectified by Jesus. "You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also" (Mt 5, 38-42; Lk 6, 29-30). We love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us not to encourage them to continue with their abominations but to make them aware of a forgiving God and thus lead them to remorse, repentance and transformation.

In the advice “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads” we can see the goal of loving one’s enemy and forgiving him. Burning coals are symbolic of repentance and transformation. In Proverbs 25,22, this aim is unambiguously stressed, “You will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you.” God marks Cain with this specific intention in mind. The sense of guilt in his mind will burn him like a heap of coals. Such a person, who is distanced from God and man, tormented by his heinous guilt, may even think of death as a more welcome thing than wandering on the face of this earth friendless, tired and hungry. But that is not what God wants. He finds joy, not in the death of the sinner, but in his transformation. This is obvious on the pages of the Bible “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God;so turn, and live” (Eze 18,32). “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live” (Eze 33,11). All these assertions of the prophet make the meaning and goal of the protection given by God clear.

So nobody has to be afraid. Even if one has committed the grossest sin, and carries the burden of guilt, there is no need to fear and despair. You will get God’s protection. Only one thing you have to do. Move away from the sinful path. Confess your sins and come back into the fold. Remember it was your brother you hated and killed. When you realize that you will have true repentance and transformation. Thus, when you know God as the Father of all, and all our brethren, your fear will vamoose. There will be joy in your heart. Cain will be a new creation. Instead of being a synonym for a soulless slaughterer, he will become a living testimony. That is the goal of the mark put on to him. Anybody could be Cain – you and me!

## 4 GOD IS MY SHIELD



*“The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great”*  
(Gen 15, 1)

Man’s fear started in the Paradise. The first parents, after eating the forbidden fruit, tried to make a garment out of fig leaves to hide their nakedness. Since it did not work, they went and hid themselves among the trees. Until then they waited with great joy and enthusiasm to hear the footsteps of God. But, after disobeying the command of the Lord, they became afraid of Him. It is in the reply of man to God’s question “where are you” that we find the word fear for the first time in the bible, “LORD God called to the man, and said to him,

“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”(Gen 3, 9-10). God’s presence, a source of joy until now, has become a cause of fear for them.

Eating the forbidden fruit opened the eyes of Adam and Eve but what they saw was their own nakedness and they were overcome with shame. Before that, they did not feel ashamed of their nakedness. Those who disobey God lose their innocence and become ashamed and afraid. The presence of God who was until then, their source of life, joy and whole being, now filled them with terror. After this, all their descendants will be subject to fear. Fear will be the emotion that will dominate them and enslave them. It is sin that made man see God as a punishing judge rather than a loving Father. Fear took hold of them and in the presence of God, they trembled.

It is in this situation that God comes into the life of humanity with the consoling and strengthening word, “Fear Not”. For the first time this message was addressed to Abraham, the Father of our faith. As he went through obstacles and difficult situations, this became a much needed and life giving message for him.

The call came at a least expected moment in Abraham’s life. He was a rich and influential local leader with a supportive and loving family. From the security of his home, family and friends, he was called out. “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’ ” (Gen 12, 1). Abraham was asked to leave everything he had and go to a strange land. Besides, the call came from a God who was totally unknown to him. However, he dared to believe this God and immediately left his home. That moment marked a turning point in his life as it started the process of his transformation as “The Father of

Faith”. He was called to walk through a path filled with hidden threats and evident dangers. Crisis that confronted him one after another tested his faith to its core.

Days turned into months and years. Still none of the promises made by God was fulfilled. He was promised a land and descendants like stars in the sky and sand at seashore. Even at the age of ninety, he was not blessed with a child. Faced with famine he went into Egypt searching for food. It almost became a fatal mistake and his very life was at risk when his beautiful wife was taken by the king. Yet, Abraham believed and did not question the promises God made to him. At the decisive moment God interfered and saved him and his wife from the hands of Pharaoh who sent him away with a lot of gifts.

In order to safeguard peace and brotherhood, Abraham advised his companion and nephew Lot to Part Company with him and to take whichever part he wanted. Without any hesitation or a second thought Lot chose the fertile Jordan valley and left. Abraham was left with the barren desert. But, when he heard that Lot was taken prisoner in battle, Abram dared to go to war against four kings. He trusted that the God who called him out and led him so far would help him in this battle. His trust was not in vain. He defeated the kings and freed Lot and his family with all the property. It was soon after this episode that, Abram heard the voice saying, “Fear not, Abraham, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (Gen 15, 1). By then, Abraham was convinced that, though none of the promises were yet fulfilled, He who called him out of the security of his home will not abandon him. In all the dangers He was with him and protected him. It was this conviction that God cemented down with the image of “Shield”.

The context of the mention will shed light into the image of the shield. It comes immediately after narrating the dangerous and risky war to liberate his brother Lot. Shield is a necessary weapon for the soldier who goes to war. Sword, spear and javelin were weapons for attacking but the shield was used to protect one from attacks with these weapons.

During the time of Abraham, there were different kinds of Shields with different sizes and shapes. Those who fight with swords used small round shields whereas those who fought with spear used large shields that were shaped like a long square. The shields were made of wood and covered with leather and fastened with metal bars. It will have a handle inside. When the soldiers encounter the enemy, they would hold together those shields and it will become like a protective wall. It would protect the soldiers from the flying arrows, piercing spears and cutting swords. The armour that covers the whole body performs the same function. The image of the shield describes the kind of protection God was giving to Abraham.

In the Bible there are many instances where God is pictured as a shield. They are seen most frequently in the Psalms. “For thou dost bless the righteous, O LORD; thou dost cover him with favour as with a shield” (Ps 5, 12). “For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day” (Ps 91, 3-5). Through the image of the Shield and Buckler, the sacred author is drawing the picture of God who grants us protection from the enemies.

If we have God as our shield and buckler, we will not have to fear any enemy, any situation. It is God who says, “Fear not,

I am your Shield”. If God, who called us to life and protects us every moment, is with us, why should we fear? This promise God made to Abram is true for all of us. God created every one with deliberate knowledge and definite plan for each one. Everyone is created in the image of God and so bears His image in his soul. Hence, the force that drives us is not that of fear but of love and courage. There is no place for fear in the face of love. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love” (1 Jn 4, 18). God loved us so much that He gave His only Son to save us. We trust in that love and this trust will enable us to overcome every feeling of fear. Then, we can live with joy and in the freedom of the children of God. It is God who says, “Fear Not, I am your Shield”.

## 5 GOD WHO HEARS THE CRY



*“What is wrong, Hagar?” he asked. ‘Do not be afraid, for God has heard the boy’s cry in his plight’*

(Gen 21, 17).

In the heat of the scorching sun, the desert was hot like a furnace. There was not a trace of cloud to give even a little protection from the sun. There was no sign of life anywhere in sight. There was no place to go and no path to follow. The whole place was lifeless. Hagar trembled with fear at the thought that in a short time she and her child would join this lifeless world.

She did not choose this journey. Once before, she had come into the desert. That was when her mistress Sarah had quarreled with her for not respecting her. Fed up with her mistress, she ran off into the desert where an angel appeared, promising her protection and guided her path. However, she was asked to return to her mistress. She obeyed. Now, she was thrown out with her son, apparently for no reason.

Her mistress, Sarah, seeing that she was barren, gave Hagar to her husband to produce an heir. Though Bible says that Hagar was given as a wife, she did not have the position or right of a wife. All that Sarah wanted was, borrow Hagar’s womb to have a son. According to the custom of the time, it was perfectly normal and legal.

Finally, when Sarah herself gave birth to a son, the whole atmosphere changed. Sarah no more considered the son born to Hagar, as her own. Seeing Ismael, son of Hagar and Isaac, son of Sarah, playing together, Sarah began to fear that Ismael might demand his rights as the first born and that Isaac would not become the sole heir of his father. Soon, she took steps to eliminate the threat. She complained to Abraham and demanded that Hagar and her son should be cast out of the house. “Drive away that slave-girl and her son,’ she said to Abraham, ‘this slave-girl’s son is not to share the inheritance with my son Isaac” (Gen 21, 10).

Sarah had never thought of this possibility when she compelled Hagar to have a child by her husband. She had decided that the child Hagar delivers will be her own. Sarah never bothered to secure the consent of Hagar for such an arrangement. Hagar was a slave who was supposed to have no rights or opinions of her own. She was not allowed to have her own personal likes and dislikes. Sarah did not think that Hagar is a woman, like her, and might have her own desires

and feelings. She did not bother to think what will happen to her slave and to the son she forced her to have. All she wanted was to secure the rights of her own son, Isaac.

Abraham was forced to obey Sarah just as the first time when she mistreated Hagar. Then Hagar ran away but this time Abraham was compelled to cast out his first born and his mother. “Early next morning, Abraham took some bread and a skin of water and, giving them to Hagar, put the child on her shoulder and sent her away. She wandered off into the desert of Beersheba” (Gen 21, 14). Abraham worried about his son but God assured him that Ismael will be protected and blessed and further told him to obey Sarah because the Salvation history will have to continue through the son born to Sarah. Only Abraham knew of this promise and plan of God. For Hagar, all she could see was a desert that was a deathtrap for her and her son. She was so shocked that she could not even cry out. With a broken heart she said to herself, “I cannot bear to see the child die. Sitting at a distance, she began to sob” (Gen 21, 16).

The child was hungry and thirsty. The food and water that Abraham had given them did not last long. His throat was dry and parched and a faint cry came out of him. His father Abraham was not around to hear that cry. Unable to watch him die, his mother had moved away and turned to the other side. It was a moment the mother and child came face to face with death. For them everything had come to an end. But then, at that last moment, as a response to their desperate cry, the voice of the Lord rang out in the desert, “Do not be afraid, for God has heard the boy’s cry in his plight” (Gen 21, 17).

That is God! When all the doors are closed and there is no way to escape, He will open a new path. When there is no one else to help, God will extend His helping hand. The voice of

the Lord will give strength to the weak, hope to the desperate, light to those in darkness and protection to the abandoned. It will open the eyes of the poor to see the reality of the presence of God. “Then God opened Hagar’s eyes and she saw a well, so she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy” (Gen 21, 19-20).

That well was there before, but Hagar, blinded with tears, could not see it. She was lost in her own sorrow that she could not see the source of the life-giving water. God heard the cry of the child and opened her eyes, entered into their life in a decisive manner. She heard God’s voice saying “Fear Not” and she regained peace and security in the Lord.

No more was she afraid or felt abandoned. Though others had rejected them, God had not done so. She was convinced that God will never abandon them and felt strong enough to encounter any possible obstacle in life. With the psalmist she told herself, “If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up” (Ps 27,10) She decided to settle in the desert. Without the presence of God, desert was a death trap for her, but with Him, it became a life-giving land. Her son became the Father of twelve tribes. “These are the descendants of Ishmael son of Abraham by Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian slave-girl... These are the sons of Ishmael, and these are their names, according to their settlements and encampments, twelve chiefs of as many tribes. He lived in the territory stretching from Havilah-by-Shur just outside Egypt.” (Gen 25, 12-18).

God will abandon no one. When all the doors are closed, he would open a new door and show a new way to continue in the path of life. He will show the right path to the lost, strengthen the weak, protect the orphaned and give hope to those who are desperate. One may be blinded with sorrow to see the possibilities at hand but God will open his/her eyes to

see the source of life nearby. In the midst of our problems, there will be its solution but to see it one has to cry out to God. God opened Hagar's eyes to see the well as a response to the cry of the child. God will hear the cry of the broken hearted and open possibilities before them. Hence, we are to pray without losing hope, without getting lost in fear and without ceasing. God will hear our prayer and respond in His own time. No prayer will go unanswered. That is a promise of God.

## 6 THE LORD IS MY REFUGE



*“The LORD appeared to him and said, ‘I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham’s sake’”*

(Gen 26,24).

Isaac is a small character that got squeezed in between his father Abraham and his son Jacob. Isaac does not have the courage of faith of Abraham or the shrewd intelligence of

Jacob. He did not have to face any serious test of faith like Abraham or any grave crisis like Jacob. Maybe because of that, not much has been said about Isaac in the Bible. The author takes 14 chapters to describe the activities of Abraham. To talk about Jacob, he takes almost 20 chapters. But the activities of Isaac are confined to just one chapter (Gen 26). Even then we get some significant revelations through Isaac.

Isaac was a shepherd who had to suffer the opposition from, and persecutions by, the local people. Wherever he went to stay, he was faced with bitter antagonism. The wells he dug have been captured by his adversaries and he was forced to flee the place. Having no guts and gumption to resist, Isaac goes away leaving the wells, to seek new pastures. It was during these wanderings God appears to him and strengthens him.

In a well that he dug after overcoming oppositions galore, he found water. Nobody came to grab it. Isaac here recognizes the protection given to him by God. He was able to use this well without opposition and he names the well 'Rehoboth'. His statement "Now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land" (Gen 26,22) reveals his sense of security. The name 'Rehoboth' means room or place. It was after that Isaac had the vision from God and his revelation at Beersheba (Gen 26,23-24).

Isaac had many reasons to be afraid. He was an alien wherever he went. Although his father Abraham was Promised Land by God, that promise has not yet materialized. He has not even an inch of land to call his own. The name Isaac means 'he laughed'. It was reminder that he would be a blessing and therefore would bring joy to the whole world. But until now he did not have any opportunity for getting any blessing or any joy. He was saved from the sword of his zealous father

by hair's breadth. Could anybody boast of fearlessness and heroism when lying on the sacrificial altar, hands and legs tied, surrounded by raging fire and waiting breathlessly for the fearsome moment for the sword to smite his neck? There were also further moments in Isaac's life when fear loomed large.

But it is God that has given the assurance, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you" (Gen 26,24). God kept his word. In all the crises, God stood by him; he was supported and succored whenever Isaac faced a dilemma. He lived for 180 long years and when he died peacefully and with the sense of contentment, his sons Esau and Jacob buried him in the tomb of his father Abraham. Not only, that he is commemorated and revered throughout the salvific saga along with his father and son. The nomenclature of God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob shows what an elevated position Isaac holds. His name thus became so lofty that it got linked to the name of God himself.

We too might face problems in life as encountered by Isaac. Sometimes we too are faced with dilemma and consternation. Failure in all our undertakings, not getting the recognition we deserve, getting ostracized and criticized at every turn, denial of a foothold that we rightly deserve – all these can come as challenges to shatter our confidence. We may face abject failures and horrendous episodes. But in all these adverse circumstances, remember the promise Jesus has given us, "I am with you". It is this sense of reliance on God that gives us the sense of security. It drives away our fear. A haven is a shelter in which we feel safe against the ravages of thunderous storms and monstrous waves of the sea in fury and turmoil. Such a shelter we will find only in the presence of the Lord. His presence will bring us strength and courage, extirpating all

the pusillanimity and cowardice that we harbour in the caverns of our hearts. Just like Isaac was given the assurance, we too are given that assurance. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob walks with us, is on our sides, and dwells with us. He is our God. It is him we call Emmanuel. So don't be cowardly at any point in time because the Lord is with us and we are assured of his succor.

## 7 THE GATE OF HEAVEN – BETHEL



*“He was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven’”*

(Gen 28,17).

Jacob: Although he had received the advice of his mother and the blessings of his father prior to his journey, it was, a running away, a flight, from his brother who had planned to kill him. There were enough reasons for him to be afraid. Although he had just carried out what his mother had told him, his conscience gnawed at him for doing what he did because he thought it was a mistake. He hoodwinked his father into believing that he was eating hunted game meat whereas

he was actually eating lamb meat. He also had covered himself with kid lamb skin to make his father believe that he was Esau as Esau was a hairy man. He did all that because his mother told him to do like that. When he was afraid whether he would be cursed instead of being blessed, it was again his mother who fortified him by saying “Let your curse be on me, my son” (Gen 27,13).

When he could not take another step forward, he lay down, on the roadside. Lying exhausted there, he was a defeated man. His mind was bruised by guilty conscience and was afraid that his brother was in hot pursuit with a drawn knife. His destination, Haran, was still far away. Thick gloom loomed before him. He was exhausted, broken. Making a stone, he found on the way, his pillow he laid down – like a symbol of failure. Jacob had a really hard time.

His very name smacked of inferiority complex and fear - Jacob. It means “holder of the heel”. He was the second of the twins, and when he was born he had gripped the heel of his brother Esau. His mother convinced him it was the divine plan the second born would take the place of the first (25,23).

The elder brother who had gone hunting came back empty handed and hungry, his stomach clamoring and screaming for food. As he lay down exhausted on the road, Jacob recollected how his elder brother was begging for some sweet red stuff or broth he had made from red beans. Esau was so famished and he was willing to give anything, even his birth right, for a cup of delicious, aromatic, scrumptious stuff. Wasn't it the beginning of everything? Esau is the elder and he is fat. But he is a simpleton, frank and straight-forward, easily gullible. He does not have any big plans about the future. He does not make any mighty schemes to achieve something great. His weakness is the desire for food. He has a big appetite. How

meanly I exploited that weakness in him, Jacob thought. Some red beans pudding. That was the price I paid for getting his birth right! What justification do I have? I made him swear in the name of God before I gave him the pudding like broth. He enjoyed it; he drank it to his fill. Wiping the lips with the back of his hands, he went away, not knowing what he had lost in the bargain. He did not even try to know. He had only that much sense!

It was a confrontation between mental and physical prowess. There I won. My brother, a nincompoop! The birth right and its entitlements, which belonged to him, now belong to me. But will the birthright I got by deceit hold before the law? What about the blessing I got from my father by telling lies and pretensions?

No clear-cut answer for anything. Only one thing is prominent – fear. Only one thing is left now. Flee. Flee and hide. But now it is already night. I can't even see the way. My legs have no strength left to run again. What are those drum beat like noises that echo in my ears? The foot falls of my brother in hot pursuit? Jacob trembled and quivered. Exhausted from the exertion, he slept.

The dream he had while he slept had absolutely no relation with the reality. Open heaven above his head. A ladder coming down from heaven with its legs firmly fixed on the ground. Angels going up and down the ladder; at the top end of the ladder stood God himself. He must have felt that God is coming down to punish him for the gross injustice he had done. But the words he heard from God were unbelievable. No accusation, no scolding. No indication of any of the mistake he had committed. On the contrary, promises. Not just one, but 7 promises. He knew the number seven stand for perfection, fullness.

1. The land you lie on will be given to you and your progeny. 2. Your children will be as numerous as the sand on earth. 3. Through you all the nations will be blessed. 4. I am with you. 5. Wherever you go I will protect you. 6. I will bring you back to this land. 7. I will not abandon you (Gen 28,10-15).

Jacob did not know if it was a dream or an empty vision. Can a mind immersed in guilt work out such a dream? He soon realized that the dream he had was not just a hallucination or illusion but a meaningful dream. That recognition increased his fear. “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it! And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven’” (Gen 28,16-17).

God descended to the valley of the defeated. He was sleeping with the burden of guilt and here just above his head the gate of heaven is opened. Here is God’s hand that holds and lifts the fallen person, the solacing, strengthening divine presence. Pursuing the fleeing person not to catch him and destroy him but to bless him and raise him from his fallen state. This is Jacob’s first experience with God and it was an experience, giving hope and driving away all the fear. He gave the place a name “Bethel” – The House of God.

Jacob felt that heaven is not something above, far away, but it is right here at arm’s length. God does not take into consideration my weakness, my cowardice, the crookedness and deceit resulting from that. The realization that God had chosen him after knowing fully well about his shortcomings flashed through his mind. That was just a start. There is a long distance to go, a long distance to run. The divine experience he received will stay in his mind like a piece of flaming coal,

covered by the ash of inferiority complex and fear. It will be the source of some unknown power.

Bethel is a pointer. A symbol that is always relevant. God does not see things as man sees them. When the burden of the past threatens the present, what God sees is the joy that blooms in the future. We should not let our past falls and failures cloud our future. Whatever happened, they happened for good. They happened because God had sanctioned them. We are not to justify our mistakes, but should learn from our mistakes, our failures. Forgetting all that lies behind, we should move forward keeping our eye fixed on the promises God had given (Philippi 3,13).

Come to think of it! Who is there who has never faltered or fallen? How few are the persons that have never stumbled in their lives in the list the Bible presents! We have Noah who after getting drunk cursed his son (Gen 9,18-29), Abraham told a lie as he was afraid of the Pharaoh (12,11-13), Jacob deceived his brother, Moses who could not enter the Promised Land as he failed to give glory to God (Num 20,12), Aaron the Chief Priest who moulded the calf for the Israelites to worship (Ex 32,2-6), Samson who was blinded by lust (Judg 16), David who without any remorse committed adultery and murder – we have any number of them in the Bible. This is not the story of only the Old Testament. In the New Testament we have Peter whom Jesus called the rock on which he would build his Church. But Peter had no compunctions to deny his Master before a mere maid. Paul had seen Jesus as a gross blasphemer and wanted to extirpate him and his cohorts, as he thought.

All of them give us a lesson. It is where we consider everything is lost, has ended, all finished, that God starts things afresh. God can transform even the gate of hell as the gate of heaven. So, take heart. Get up gladly. Gather strength from the

promise of God. You have to go a long way. God needs you. He said that he did not come to call the righteous, but sinners (Mt 9,13). It is this Guru who calls you. Get up and dust up. Break the knots around your neck (Is 52,2). See the gate of heaven opening; look at the path of salvation in front. Don't be afraid. He will be always with you, here, there and everywhere!

## 8 THE FAC OF GOD – PENUEL



*“So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip”  
(Gen 32,30-31).*

It was a night that drastically upset the life of Jacob. He was terror stricken yet, trying to sleep alone on the eastern bank of the river Jabbok. The name of the river sounded similar to his name. His mind had only one thought – how to run away and escape from the disaster that was coming to swallow him up.

For the last 20 years Jacob had been given constant protection by God. There were miraculous interferences in his

life. He had gained things which were even beyond his wildest dreams, he had two wives and their helpers, 12 children from them, and immense wealth of flocks and herds. In spite of all these, his mind was weak and cowardly. It was not easy for him to embrace sleep which kept him at arm's distance.

He had hoodwinked his father and elder brother and now he has been paid back with the same coin. His father-in-law broke his promises many a time. He was now on the receiving end. He promised him the younger daughter and made him work as a slave for 7 long years. On the night of his wedding, he was made to drink heavily and the elder sister was forced to lie with him. To get his favorite Rachel, he had to do another 7 long years of slavery. He thought of making some money for himself and made some agreements with Laban, but Laban breached the agreements. But he remembered that God had kept his word which was given to him at Bethel. In another 6 years he became rich.

He was afraid if his father-in-law would agree with his plan of going back home. So he had to flee from his father-in-law's home with his wives and children. Well, he was not unfamiliar with such flights, such running away. But Laban was on hot pursuit. Laban had strong men with them and when, on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, Laban caught up with him, he was flabbergasted, dumbfounded. But once again the Almighty came to his rescue. Since he was given warning the previous night, no harm befell him. The reaction of Laban was limited to scolding him. One thing more happened. An agreement was drawn. Keeping the pile of stone they had collected, they entered into an agreement. This pile will be the boundary. Jacob can't trespass east of this. And Laban can't trespass the west of it. Initially Jacob thought it was a good bargain. But now it is proving to be a trap. He can't run eastward.

He was returning to the land where his elder brother was residing. Although 20 years had gone by, the sense of guilt still gnawed at his heart. Memories were still afresh. He was afraid. He wanted to please his brother somehow and for that he got some valuable presents ready. It was so expensive that it might be the tithes of what he actually possessed. 200 she-goats and 20 he-goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 30 milche camels and their colts, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys. If you multiply all this by 10, it would roughly give the figure of Jacob's total wealth. They were made into separate droves and the droves were sent to his brother in advance (Gen 32,13-21).

Jacob was not sure if this strategy would work. Therefore he divided his remaining wealth into two parts. He made his wives and children cross the stream and made them go westward. Jacob alone stood here, on the eastern bank. Even if Esau comes and destroys everything he will be safe here and he can still run away! The picture of a real coward! As when he started his flight, so now also he lay down on the side of the road. His mind was upset with guilty conscience and doubts of all sorts. In the midst of all these mental afflictions, he slipped into sleep.

Then it happened. An invisible hand is strangling him. Finding it difficult to breathe, Jacob woke up startled. He was sure that he would be strangled by the adversary who was immensely more powerful than him. No place to run and hide. Neither are his legs strong enough to carry him. The adversary is pressing hard as if to kill him. Jacob has to do one of the two things – either die like a coward by surrendering to the might of the enemy or resist him gathering all his might.

For the first time in his life, Jacob decided to put up a fight. He is not sure if he will win. But he is not ready to die like a

coward, surrendering unconditionally. The fear of death stirred up some unknown power in him, a frantic zeal. Jacob then recognized his strength, hitherto unknown to him. The grip of the adversary was slackening. Jacob felt that the adversary was getting afraid. After hitting him hard and dislocating his hip, the adversary told Jacob, ***“Let me go, for the day is breaking”*** (Gen 32,26). In spite of his excruciating pain and discomfort, Jacob continued wrestling. Jacob let the stranger go only after he had ensured his victory and making the stranger bless him.

Who was this stranger? What is the meaning of this duel? What is the message the Bible wants to give through the description of this strange incident? The interpretation that the author simply translated a legend in vogue in the Middle East does not carry any weight. The psychological interpretation that it was a dream in which the fear that accumulated in the mind of Jacob came to attack him also does not sound convincing. There are people who believe that it was an angel of the Lord who attacked Jacob. But if we examine the description minutely, we can see that it was God himself that was dueling with Jacob. Then the question naturally arises, Will God act like an adversary? An answer to this question is a must.

The significance that the writer gave to this incident in the life of Jacob and the change that took place in the nature of Jacob after that wrestling is noteworthy. At the start of his flight, God appeared. Then he was a blessing, comforting and strengthening Father. God kept his word. But Jacob continued to be what he was. His cowardice, crookedness and fleeing persisted. Here God behaved like an adversary. The interference of God made Jacob feel as if he was going to be finished off. But the object of God was not killing Jacob but strengthening him. God made Jacob aware of the power available within him. The one who appeared an adversary was in fact the Loving Father, the friend that accompanies him.

The mind threatened with the fear of death fought with all its might. The hitherto unknown power exhibited itself. No more fear. Now he is guided by the desire to win. However mighty the adversary be, however badly he might have wounded him, he won't let the enemy go unscathed. He will fight to the last. It was a life and death fight. In that fight he defeated God himself! Or better, God allowed him to win. God strengthened him.

Jacob was given a new name – Israel. One who became triumphant after fighting with man and God (Gen 32,28). The name Jacob generated inferiority complex and fear. The name was therefore changed. The new name indicates his new nature and more than that the new mission. From now on he won't run away. Even if he wants to, he can't do that, because the duel had made him limping! That also was a sign and indication. Each limping step reminded him of his fight with God. The weakness in his leg became his strength. The sacred author stresses the strength that was awakened in Jacob, now Israel. ***“The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel”*** (Gen 32,31). When he came to Bethel there was darkness. But his return is to light.

Jacob was the one who named the place Penuel. Panim = face; el = God. By combining the two Hebrew words, we got the word Peniel. It means, Saw God face to face. The truth from which he was trying to run away, he saw face to face; he fought; he won and His adversary was God! He recognized that God was not an adversary that comes to kill, but a friend who comes to strengthen him. The name Penuel reminds one of this recognition.

Further happenings go ahead in a welcome manner. Esau, accompanied by 400 men came not to ruin Jacob but to receive him with love and respect. No more enmity. No more

fear. Both lived like brothers. The author reminds us that when their father died, together they buried him (Gen 35,29).

The blessing of the father that Jacob got through deceit and lies did not help him personally. Twenty years he had to spend in Haran – away from his parents, in an alien land, a life of misery. Jacob deceived his father and brother once but he was deceived by his father-in-law more than once. When everything was settled and he returned home there was strife among his children. The totally unexpected death of his beloved wife, Rachel, with the birth of her second son, was a severe blow, too hard to bear. He spent years mourning for his favorite son Joseph, thinking he had died. Finally he died in Egypt, far away from the Promised Land. Then, his children lived in slavery for 400 years in Egypt. When all these misfortunes were happening to Jacob and his descendants, Esau lived in his own land Edom. His children grew up in freedom as a free people, later giving birth to a dynasty.

Don't doubt it! Blessings obtained through deceit won't be real blessings. But even from mistakes and sins, the Almighty God can produce good things. That is what the salvific history that continues through Jacob teaches us. Salvation, basically, is not something that man acquires on his own. It is a gift given by God. To receive that gift God himself will strengthen man. God often opposes us like an adversary to make us recognize our hidden strengths and awaken them further.

There is no need to lament thinking about your lack of strength or talents. Don't bother about the imagined perils that might lay on your way ahead. Don't try to run away or turn back from the impediments on your way. They are opportunities that God provides you to awaken your dormant strengths and talents. God does not test anybody beyond his

endurance. When given tests, the Almighty will give you the strength also to face them.

The paralytic had been lying on the banks of the Bethsaida Pond for 38 years, lamenting he has nobody to help him. To him Jesus said, "Take your bed and go home." The Lord's words kindled and awakened the strength in him. His limbs became strong and he got up and walked away. This is God. He is the One who strengthens the weak, gives courage to the cowardly. When accidents happen, when you feel alone with nobody to help you, when you think even God is against you, remember that the Lord is with you, to help you, to strengthen you, to give life and lead you to your eternal home. So don't be despair; don't be afraid. In every event in your life, recognize the face of the Lord. Then each crisis will turn out to be a Peniel experience for you.

## 9 PROTECTION DURING JOURNEY



*“I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for ... I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again”*

(Gen 46,3-4).

Fear was the twin of Jacob. It was his constant companion. Crookedness was part of his character. The Bible itself explains that the meaning of Jacob is ‘one who is unreliable’. He was afraid to face realities. He always sought refuge in running

away. His guilty conscience might have been an additional reason for his inordinate fear. He had usurped the position of his elder brother by giving him a cup of stew. Then with the active collaboration of his mother and foul machinations of his he tricked his father into giving him blessings that rightly belonged to the first born. The result? He had to flee the place fearing the vengeance of his aggrieved brother Esau. He ran to his uncle Laban, who was far away. There also he found no peace.

To get the woman he loved, he had to work for seven years like a slave. Then on the night of the marriage he got heavily intoxicated with drinks and spent the night with his sister-in-law in the camp. In the morning when he became sober again, he realized his blunder. Then again he had to work for seven years to get his wife. His betrayal and running away continued unabated. Then he fled with four wives, twelve children and a herd and flock. He was saved from the irate father-in-law after being pursued and caught, just because of special divine providence. In spite of all this, fear stayed with him; also the tendency to run away, too.

Jacob was stunned to hear that his elder brother Esau was coming to him with 400 men. He tried to please his brother in all possible ways. He sent flocks of sheep to him as gifts more than once. Then he sent his wives and children. He made everybody cross the stream and stayed back at this side. He was ready to run away again if there was a need. That night he was attacked by an unknown person. He fought for his life not knowing who his adversary was. He had no way to run away. He had only two options – either win and live or lose and die. It was then he recognized the power lying dormant in him. He also realized that his adversary was none other than God himself. God gave him a new name – Israel that means one who came out victorious in his duel with God.

Jacob gave the place a name – Peniel – the face of God. He saw God face to face. Nay, more than that, he wrestled with God, propelled by the super-human power awakened in him. By that he recognized the power God had bestowed upon him. Still fear did not fully vanish from him. More crises will come. There will be more tests to his strength. While asleep from fatigue on the wayside, the heaven's gate opened above him. God appeared to him. Angels came down. He got the promise that God would accompany him. To commemorate the divine experience he named the place Bethel. It is the house of God. God is there. "I did not know it" (Gen 28,17). Although Bethel and later Peniel gave him the assurance that God was with him Jacob was not ready to believe it completely. That is why again he had to be given the promise.

Jacob had thought that his favourite son Joseph was dead. When he came to know that Joseph had not died but was reigning as the ruler of Egypt he was immensely pleased. Accepting the invitation of his son Joseph, Jacob gets ready to go to Egypt. As he is on his way, God again appears and tells him, "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again; and Joseph's own hand shall close your eyes" (Gen 46,3-4). From now on Jacob becomes calm. Now he will travel fearlessly. He has learned from his experiences. He knows that God will keep his word. God made him strong and great enough to bless the Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt.

The fear of Jacob, his running away, and the divine intervention that brought an end to these things are relevant even today to all of us. When filled with sense of guilt at the wrongs committed, when feelings that even siblings are turning against you haunt you, when you feel all escape routes are sealed and death is certain, don't forget that it was God

who has promised, "Don't be afraid I am with you." It is this God that always walks with us whom we qualify as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Adversities, antagonisms, failures and flights from reality should be considered as opportunities granted by God to purify our soul and to fortify our minds.

Peniel and Bethel are two endpoints of a journey. At one place, one is consoled and comforted and at the other place one is fortified through duel. No need for any fear now. No need to run away. You can overcome any crisis. When grasping the import of these incidents, you should recognize the presence of the Lord that dwells in us. We should never let fear vanquish us. "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Ps 46,10). It is this recognition that made Jacob Israel. It is this recognition that God gives through the experiences of Jacob. Don't be afraid. God will come with you. In our heavenward journey to our paternal home, God will be always with us. If God is with us, whom shall we fear?

## 10 BETWEEN HOSTILE ARMY AND RAGING SEA



*“Don’t be afraid! Stand firm!”* (Ex 14,13).

How joyfully did they embark upon their journey! One after the other ten plagues devastated Egypt. The life of the people had become unbearable. Finally the first born of Egyptians, both of people and animals, died in one night. The Pharaoh’s back was broken and finally he surrendered before the might of the Lord. He declared freedom for the Israelites. They really looted the Egyptians. They forcefully took all kinds of silver and gold ornaments and expensive dresses from their

real owners and then they embarked on their journey. To show them the way there was the pillar of clouds during the day. To give them shade there was the cloud cover over their heads. To show them their way at night there was the pillar of fire. They really had a joyful march. The gleeful procession of the liberated slaves led by God!

And then? In the eyes of the mortals what Moses did was quite a blunder. A leader even with normal common sense could have guessed that the Pharaoh, once his agony about the death of his firstborn was over, would pursue the fleeing slaves. In those circumstances the action of Moses asking his people to put up camps on the shores of the Sea and rest there can only be considered a big blunder. All the chariots of Egypt, led by the pharaoh himself, came like a whirlwind. The Israelites were flabbergasted and trembled with fear. They condemned the indiscretion of their leader. In consternation they asked Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?’ (Ex 14,11).

In fact it was not Moses but God himself that wanted the people to set up camps at the shores of the Red Sea. Moses was just carrying out God’s orders. Thus the one responsible for the predicament was not Moses, but God himself. Moses could now do only one thing – cry to the Lord and call on him as he had been leading them so far. The reply God gave might appear very strange indeed, “Tell the Israelites to go forward” (14,15). The raging Sea in front! At the back the fast approaching hostile army! What is the way out? In the world renowned movie “The Ten Commandments”, a small leader, who represents the majority of the Israelites, asks, “Where? Go into the center of this Sea?” The reply Moses gave was especially noteworthy, “No, into the hands of God!”

There is an explanation given by the Jewish Rabbis. Holding the rod, it was Moses that stepped into the Sea first. His feet touched the water. Nothing happened. Moses continued forward. Water reached his knees. On he went. Water came up to his waist. Nothing was happening. Moses continued. Water reached up to his neck. Nothing was happening. But Moses still continued. His nose was now touching water. His breath made slight movements in the water. Then lo and behold! it happened. As if slashed by a mighty sword, the Sea got divided into two. In the middle there was a wide path. The Israelites crossed the Sea very fast. Until all the people reached the other side safely, Moses stood there.

Now it was the Pharaoh and his soldiers that were proved foolish. The water of the sea had scrolled high on both sides like walls of water with the wide path in the middle. The Egyptian footmen, horses, chariots and the soldiers hotly pursued the Israelites at their heels. As soon as all the Israelites reached the other side safely, Moses turned back with his extended rod. The water descended flooding the path. All the Egyptian army perished. The Egyptians saw the might of the Lord who liberates slaves.

We can garner a few gems of understanding here. God intervened at a time when the Israelites thought there was absolutely no way to extricate themselves from the dire predicament. We all have heard about the proverb, “To be between the devil and deep sea.” To whichever direction they turn, they find a blind alley, dead end. Sure ruin staring at them. This can come to us, too. It can be a financial crisis, a mortal disease where medical science proves to be absolutely helpless. It can be a plunge into the mire of being slandered without rhyme or reason, or accused of crimes which are not even contemplated. They are moments when one tends to think

the only way out is death. In those moments of despondence and despair, remember the words of Moses, “Go forward! Not into the midst of the sea, but into the hands of the Lord! The hands of the Lord have not become too short to save.”

Let us pay heed to the lessons given by the Rabbis. If the Israelites had decided to delay their entry into the Sea until the path through it became visible, they would have been prey to the swords of the Pharaoh or once again they would have been enslaved. Faith is an adventure – a plunge into the darkness, a walk into the raging sea, a moving forward relying on Providence. That is how the Lord always works. Until he had raised his sword to plunge it into the neck of his son, Abraham did not know how the Lord would intervene, or whether he would intervene at all. So, without doubts in your mind, without your steps staggering hesitantly, believe in the Lord, rely on him, and even in the midst of the raging sea, a way will show up.

Using your human reason and logic, if you decide to embark upon a journey only after making everything foolproof, safe and sound, chances are that you may never even start your journey. You will then not know about divine Providence. It is when you are on the move that the Lord will come with his shade of cloud cover during the hot day and fire of light in the night. When leaving Haran, Abraham had nobody to rely on except the Lord. Hagar and Ismael who were abandoned in the wilderness with just enough food for a day had nothing to depend on. When Moses embarked on the mission of liberating the Israelites languishing under the mighty Pharaoh, he had nothing but a rod. When Jesus asked his Apostles to feed the thousands, they had with them just five loaves. But once they reached the hands of Jesus they multiplied more than a thousand-fold.

That is what God does every day. That is what he wants us to do – rely on him! Believe wholeheartedly, without even an iota of doubt, that he will give everything for carrying out the mission he has entrusted you with. Isn't this what is happening every day? That Albanian woman came out of the convent into the midst of the poor of the Calcutta streets with the paltry sum of just five rupees in her hand. How she grew into Mother Theresa, the pillar of hope for thousands of the destitute and a Nobel Prize winner, is a living example of this unusual logic of the Lord. So, don't be nervous, looking at the raging sea in front and the pursuing hostile soldiers at the back. You have with you the God that controls everything. Go forward! Holding the hand of God!

## 11 FORTRESSES WILL CRUMBLE



*“Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go”*

(Josh 1,9).

He had reasons galore for being frightened and dismayed. Mighty Moses, who had led them up to now, had died. The historical journey that began 40 years ago had still not reached its destination. From the woes of wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, many who had started the journey died. Leaders

like Moses, Aaron and Miriam were no more with them. The realization that he was alone in the battle for the Promised Land was not only frightening but dismaying to Joshua. There were obstacles galore in front. River Jordan bursting its banks and swiftly flowing, the Jericho Wall that bars the entrance to the Promised Land, the experienced and brave soldiers standing guard at the fortress – how to overcome all these mighty obstacles?

The encouraging and powerful exhortation we see three times in the first 9 verses of the Book of Joshua is the reply to these doubts and fears, “Be strong and courageous” (1,6, 7, 9). The Bible makes it clear what the source of the strength and courage is, “The LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (1,9). The one who leads the march is not Joshua, but the God himself, who is the Lord and Liberator. Therefore there is no need to fear anything or anybody. God will certainly keep his word. Joshua has to do only one thing, “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (1,8)

It is the life lived according to the Word that gives strength and courage that removes fear. Throughout the salvific saga we come across this promise and its fulfilment and their testimonies. Not only Abraham, Jacob and Joseph, but also Joshua himself directly experienced this strengthening divine protection. So there is no need to doubt, fear or worry. Just believe! Show your belief through meticulous obedience. Joshua believed. His belief gave him strength and courage to his followers.

It was after making due preparations in as best a manner as he could that Joshua instructed the people to move towards the Promised Land. Sending spies to Jericho was part of this

preparation. The news they brought was quite encouraging. No need to delay. The triumphant march to conquer the Promised Land can begin. The people, however, had to prepare themselves for it. They are going to enter a Holy Land. Therefore they should discard all the impure and unholy things in their possession and completely dedicate themselves to God. “Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you” (3,5). Only if the hearts are made ready, we can experience divine protection.

The journey to the Promised Land is a pilgrimage. It is also a festive procession. All the pilgrims must realize they are doing something holy. It is not Joshua, but the Lord himself that is leading them. This is obvious from the fact that in front of the procession there is the Ark of the Covenant carried by priests. The presence of the Lord that will shatter all obstacles in front of them, clearing their way, gave them strength and courage.

The first obstacle was crossing the River Jordan. Jordan is not a great river like Euphrates, Tigris or Nile or even our own Ganges or Indus. It is a stream that flows through valleys among hills. But sometimes its nature changes, especially in the rainy season and in summer when the ice melts. Then it overflows bursting its banks. As it leaps down hills, the flow will be swift and strong. It was at such a perilous time that Joshua tells the people to cross the turbulent river, as he was instructed by the Lord.

If we look from afar crossing such a turbulent river would seem fraught with risk and peril. If one tries to step into the swift flow, it is obvious that the river will drag him away. It was here that faith and obedience was proved. The priests bearing the Ark entered the river without fear. As if somebody had blocked it, the flow of water stopped. The waters were divided.

On the northern side the water mounted as if stopped by a huge dam. The water on the southern side flowed into the Dead Sea. There was dry land for the pilgrims to walk across. They crossed the river singing hymns of praise and thanks. Without fearing the mountainous waters gurgling and foaming perilously on their northern side, the priests stood firm until all the pilgrims waded across the River to safety.

When the priests realized that they were carrying the Lord and it was he who is guiding them, they set their foot in the River without fear and the River parted into two. The first impediment was successfully overcome. Greater obstacle was coming - the Jericho Wall which had barricaded the entrance to the Promised Land. Here also it was the Lord that guided the people. Just like in a festive procession, the priests bearing the Ark walked around the fortress. In front of them were the Levites sounding the trumpets. Behind them were the people. For six days, this procession was repeated, once a day. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day, the procession went round the fortress silently seven times. When the 7<sup>th</sup> round was completed, Joshua gave orders. The people shouted and screamed in expectation. The fortress collapsed. The obstacle was overcome. The door to the Promised Land was wide open.

It was not the number of soldiers or the power of the armament that helped Joshua to overcome seemingly impenetrable impediments. On the contrary it was the Lord, father to the orphans, protector to the widows and the liberator of those in bondage, that went ahead of the people draining the river and shattering the fortress making way for them. This is what happens in the salvific saga. This happened three thousand years ago in the history of Israelites and it is happening even today and it will happen in the future, too.

The overflowing Jordan River and the impeding Jericho

fortress are mere symbols. They are the symbols of the obstructions that we have to face as individuals and groups on our pilgrimage to our Promised Land – the Kingdom of Heaven. The mission God entrusts us with may not be simple and easy. No wonder, Jesus has given us forewarnings about the use of force. “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (Mt 11,12; Lk 16,16). What is this violence? Against whom are we supposed to use violence? The last part of the Sermon on the Mount makes it quite obvious that we are not asked to fight against any individual, societies of nations.

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Mt 7,13-14). There may be occasions when you might feel unable to carry out the mission God entrusted you with and stand puzzled and dismayed. Just like the River Jordan and the Jericho Wall, obstacles rise in front of you and they may seem insurmountable. These obstacles may come in the shape of disease, poverty, financial loss or even some disastrous tragedy. There might be occasions when you feel tired and exhausted as you think that you are at the end of the tether and any further step is simply impossible. These might be in the form of the failures or oppositions in the sphere of Proclaiming the Word. They might be addictions that debilitate and burden you even after your best efforts to overcome them or they might be the bitter experiences that refuse to go away, like permanent tattoos in the core of your hearts. They might be the deadening despairs or bubbling anger. Whatever they might be, when God walks with you, when you walk with God, there is no obstacle that can't be overcome. Know it and believe it.

At this juncture it is relevant to think about the thoughts

Apostle Paul who speaks about the thorn tormenting him, in spite of his ardent prayers three times. “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. ....Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12,9-10). Therefore, there is no need to doubt or fear. By listening to the voice of God and by walking with him, the obstacles in front of you will go away by themselves – the flooding rivers will go dry and the mighty walls crack, creak and crumble. You can go ahead singing the praises of God and giving him thanks. Jesus, who opened the door of the heavenly kingdom for us is the new Joshua and he is leading us from before and behind, from above and below as our protector, guard and guide.

## 12 GET UP AND EAT (1 Kings 19, 1-8)



*“Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you”*

(1 Kings 19,7).

How soon was he exhausted! He was tired of running and he lay down under a broom tree in the wilderness. He now needs only one thing, “Death”. Instead of committing suicide he prayed to the Lord earnestly, ***“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors”*** (19,4). He can’t move an inch forward. His body, and even

more his mind, was exhausted. He was running away for his life without knowing where he was going and now he is in the wilderness. He sent back the servant that had accompanied him. He continued his travel in the wilderness for another day. He wanted to die without anybody seeing it, anybody knowing it. He wanted to get dissolved in the sands of the wilderness. That is all what he needs now. His prayer was for that.

An incredible picture! This is not the lamentation of an ordinary man or a coward. He had made thrones of kings tremble and shake in awe, he had kept the people in fear of the Lord, he had brought down fire from heaven, he had killed 850 priests of Baal and he was a great Prophet. Elijah. What happened to him? He had entered the royal court without any fear and announced the impending drought and challenged Baal to make rains fall. The Prophet, burning with zeal, had fought with the entire land in the name of Yahweh. Such a fearless man he was. After 3½ years of drought he had challenged the king, people and the prophets of Baal and he was alone. He challenged Baal also. Then, when fire descended from heaven and consumed the sacrificial offerings, the entire people screamed with one voice that Yahweh was the true God. Elijah, the Lords' warrior, had set the background for such a declaration of faith by the people.

Even after proving with the Heavenly Fire as the witness that Yahweh was the only true God who had released the Israelites from bondage and made them his people, the 850 prophets of Baal had made them worship the manmade idol – Baal. Elijah killed all the 850 of them, cleansing the place from their evil influence. Such a great warrior he was. But look at him now. He has fallen down like a withered blade of grass and is lamenting. Why? Queen Jezebel had taken an oath to kill him, ***“So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do***

***not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow” (19,2).***

Elijah, who knew his life was in imminent danger, got afraid. He was gripped by the fear of death as never before. Did he think that he would be safe in Judea, which was beyond the southern border of Jezebel's kingdom Israel? Was it the reason he decided to flee south to Beersheba? But even in Judea he won't be safe, because in Jerusalem the ruler was queen Athaliah, the daughter of Jezebel. No place to run away to and hide. He was unwilling to commit suicide. Elijah did not want any tragedy to befall his servant and that is why he sent him back and decided to go forward alone in his quest for a sanctuary.

Elijah was the most important among the Old Testament Prophets and he was the symbol of prophecy. Why did he become so weak? In fact the proclamation by the people on the Mount Carmel that Yahweh was the true God was a big triumph. The people were undecided when they were asked to take a firm decision. But when they saw the prophets of Baal had failed to bring down fire from heaven, while Elijah had succeeded to do so, they made their choice and proclaimed their faith. As if requested earlier, the Lord also sent rain. Still Elijah had to run for his life and now he was lying exhausted in the wilderness with the wish to die. Was he afraid that Jezebel would carry out her threat?

Elijah knows very well that the declaration of faith by the people was a temporary one. As soon as there was objection from the ruler, they would change their mind. But he was not dependent on the people for his safety, but on God who had sent him. Then why did he fear and despair grip him as never before? It is not easy to find an answer to this question. Did he think it shameful to get killed at the hands of a woman? Is

that why he prayed God to take his life? Many questions can be asked. Finding answers to them is an uphill task. But one question is most relevant - Why is the most powerful Prophet in the Old Testament pictured in this pathetic state by the sacred writer?

However strong and courageous a person might be, Elijah too is a human being. Maybe only a man! It was the Lord who called and empowered him and made him a Prophet. The incident on the Carmel Mount was quite amazing. He was putting his life in jeopardy when he challenged the prophets of Baal to make the fire descend from above. Even before he prayed, the Lord sent the fire. By this act everybody was convinced that Yahweh was the real Lord and Elijah was his Prophet. But soon after such a show of strength Elijah is fleeing in fear of his life and that shows the human nature and the weakness in him. It was the Lord, and not Elijah, that sent the fire. But maybe, a poisonous thought of pride that he was the only one remaining faithful to Yahweh might have briefly come to his heart.

This thought of 'I alone' is seen twice in the answer Elijah, while he was hiding in a cave at Horeb, gives to the question of the Lord. They "killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away" (1 Kg 19, 10. 14). Even as the Lord approves the declaration of faith coming from Elijah because of his intense zeal, he does not approve his 'I alone' attitude. The Lord makes it very clear himself. "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (19, 18). Therefore Elijah must give up his thinking that 'he alone' is faithful to the Lord.

Isn't this thinking, perhaps, the reason behind his fear, flight and desire to die? Here we can also see an indication as

to what will happen if he removes his eye from the Lord who supports him and guides him. Why does not he think that the one who took care of him will continue taking care of him? That is human weakness. Even as Elijah is presented as a big hero, the author of the Bible reminds the readers that even he, Elijah, was a mere human being with all his fears and anxieties.

This is something that can happen even to the greatest saints and bravest of people. "I am tired. Why should I continue living like this? Everyone is against me. Nothing useful seems to come out of my life. Why to live then? Why should I suffer all this agony and anxiety? It is enough. I am tired of this life. I wish God himself takes my life away." A feeling as if one is in the mire of failure. All what was said and done so far appears meaningless and futile. This is a temptation that can happen not only to great leaders and saints but also to ordinary mortals. Without realizing it is a temptation, Elijah closed his eyes. He wished his eyes never again opened. He slipped into sleep, wishing he would never wake up.

God does not abandon somebody who has devoted his life for him. The Lord gave him life, guided him and entrusted him the prophetic mission and sent him into the midst of dangers. God would not abandon him. He sent his messenger to Elijah with warm bread and cool water. The messenger of the Lord made Elijah get up from his slumber. "Get up and eat!" Elijah got up. With shaking hands he took the bread and ate it. He drank the water also. He slept again. But God does not allow him to sink into non-waking sleep. The angel is back. This time not just food, but a new mission that God gives him: "*Get up and eat; otherwise the journey will be too much for you.*"

The life of Elijah is not something to get dissolved in the emptiness of the wilderness. The plan of God regarding him is not yet complete. He has to still go a long way. He has to go to

Horeb, walking for forty days and nights. There is the source of Israel. There, a bunch of slaves was raised to the status of the people of God. The Horeb is the Mount of the Covenant; it is better known by the name Sinai. It was the Mount where the divine experience was felt. There he should stand before God. He should accept new dangerous missions. Standing on the soil drenched with the blood of innocent Naboth, he should face the king who had ordered the murder (1 Kings 21). He should let the people know of the judgment of the Lord. He should ordain kings in Israel and the neighboring Syria and ignite the spark for revolution (1 Kings (19,15-21). Only after all this, the Prophet will ascend into heaven in fire. For that he needs energy and that is why he was given bread and water.

Elijah got up. He ate and drank. With the energy from that victuals, he had strength to traverse the wilderness forty days and nights. He had accepted the mission. No fear. No complaint. No desire to die. The bread he ate was such an energizer. Carmel and Horeb are Mounts of mighty God-experience. Between them is the wilderness of temptations, fears of death and failures. Elijah might look all alone there in the wilderness, but the divine experience on either side of it radiates into the wilderness and it strengthens and empowers Elijah.

The wilderness experience of Elijah teaches us some relevant lessons. God is with us not only at the pinnacles of our triumphs but also in the depths of failures. Wherever we are, the Lord will reveal his presence. Those who fight for the Lord will never be abandoned by him even though at times they might feel exhausted and desperate and reach at the end of the rope. It is possible that the occasions we taste failure may be the right moment to know God more closely. Therefore don't be disappointed. The one who called is faithful. Even if we become unfaithful, he will remain faithful. Recognize your

weaknesses and then the Lord will strengthen you, empower you.

The bread and water given to Elijah was symbolic of the new food that the Lord would provide the world later. With the energy of the bread, Elijah walked forty days and nights and reached Horeb. But the bread we are given is so rich and powerful that it is capable of sustaining us till we reach our paternal home in heaven. *“Take from it and eat it – This is my body that will be broken for you”*.

We should rely on God without getting tired even when we tumble and fumble on our paths. We should energize ourselves with the bread, the body of Christ that is given to us. We have to go long away along the windings paths of the wilderness to complete our mission. The travel will continue until the appointed time of the Lord. So, don't be afraid, don't be disappointed. In any sandy wilderness the Lord is with us. Let this conviction, this faith empower us, *“Get up and eat; otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”*

## 13 DARING VOICE



*“Thus says the LORD, “Have you killed, and also taken possession?” ... Thus says the LORD: “In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood. ... for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin. And of Jezebel the LORD also said, “The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel”*

(1 Kg 21, 19-23).

The Lord entrusted to him a totally dangerous mission. He was to put the king on trial, convict him and pronounce the judgment, capital punishment, to him. Elijah was aware of the danger and risk involved in this mission. When the king and his wife engaged in idol worship, Elijah went into the palace as commanded by God and pronounced the judgment, drought for three and a half years. After doing that he went into hiding. Again as God commanded, he challenged the king and the entire population on Mount Carmel. He stood alone against the 850 priestly prophets of Baal!

The Lord did not abandon him. Where the priests of Baal failed, he won. Fire dropped down from heaven to consume the offering and it was followed by rain. People that day believed that Baal was only a creation of human hand and Yahweh is the true God. They proclaimed it in public. “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God” (1 Kg 18, 39). Filled with enthusiasm, Elijah killed off all the priests of Baal and thus celebrated the victory of Yahweh.

Soon he realized that what he did was a grave mistake. Jezebel vowed to avenge the killing of her prophets by killing Elijah before the sun sets the next day. Hearing this, Elijah ran away and prayed to God to end his life. “He himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he prayed for his death saying, “*It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life*” (1 Kg 19,4). But, the Angel of the Lord woke him and gave him bread and water. With the energy from that food, he walked forty days and forty nights and reached the Mountain of the Lord. No word of consolation was pronounced for the lamentations he presented to the Lord. On the other hand he was given a dangerous mission - anoint new kings for Israel and the neighboring kingdom Syria and thus fir the revolution.

Above and beyond all these, he was given the mission of putting King Ahab on trial and pronounce capital punishment for the king and the queen. Would the king allow him to live after that? He had ran away fearing the words of the queen, Jezebel. All the same, as a prophet, he had to obey the word of God. “For to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD” (Jer 1, 7-8). This is the mission and promise God give to all the prophets He had selected and sent. Prophets, once called by Yahweh, can neither escape nor run away from his mission. However, Elijah knew that the One who called him is faithful and that conviction gave him the courage to fulfill the mission entrusted to him.

There was no question about the risk involved in his mission. God commanded him to respond to the cry of the blood of a poor farmer. Ahab, king of Israel had a summer home in Jezreel. There was a small vineyard near his mansion. He wanted that land to make a vegetable garden. The vineyard belonged to Naboth to whom the king offered to pay the money he asks for or give him any land in any place in the kingdom. It was a just offer. But, as far as Naboth was concerned, it was against the law of Israel to sell or change the ownership of the land he had inherited from his forefathers. For generations the land belonged to the family. This land was the visible sign of his participation in the Promised Land and so his covenantal relationship with God. His ancestors were buried there and it was in this land that he and his descendants would enjoy eternal rest. He cannot sell that land for any price.

King Ahab who knew the law and tradition of Israel understood the seriousness of the matter. However, he became disturbed for not getting the land he desired and it made him

sad and irritable. Not knowing what to do, he reached home in a confused state of mind. Queen Jezebel, upon hearing the cause of disappointment of the king, took it as a joke. She could not tolerate a subject who rejected the request of a king. The princes of Tyre did not know the laws and traditions of Israel and even if she knew them, she did not feel obliged to respect them.

Jezebel moved fast. The royal servants rushed to Jezreel with the command by the seal of the king. The Elders who received the order proclaimed a fast. They called a meeting and Naboth was set on high in the gathering. As decided earlier two people accused him of blaspheme and treachery against the king. The lie was approved as truth since two people vouched for it. They executed the judgment prepared by Jezebel. Naboth and his family were stoned to death in his vineyard (1 Kg 21, 3. 2 Kg 9, 26). Upon hearing the news, Jezebel told Ahab, “Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead. And as soon as he heard that Naboth the Jezreelite was dead, Ahab arose to go down to his vineyard to take possession of it” (1 Kg 21, 15-16).

Ahab did not care how Naboth died so fast. The property of the one murdered for standing against the king belonged to the royal treasury. He was happy that he got the land he so desired. He congratulated his wife who orchestrated the whole thing and felt proud of her sharp intelligence. To seal the ownership of a land it was not enough that the owner pay for it and prepare the records but walk on the land. That is why God said to Abraham, “Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you” (Gen 13, 17). Hence, Ahab set out, without any guilt feeling, to own the land. The elders who tried Naboth, the two who bore false

witness against him and the people who stoned them, all knew that it was a drama staged according to the order of the king. So, no one said anything against the king. Though they knew that they were killing an innocent man, no one questioned it. If they opposed, they would follow the fate of Naboth and so all kept silent. King Ahab thought everything was fine but he was mistaken. He had not thought about the judgment of God. A prophet appeared announcing that judgment!

The dead body can be buried but the innocent blood cannot be hidden. Blood is the source of life and it would continue to cry until the Lord respond to it. Bible talks about the cry of the innocent blood from the blood of Abel. God cannot ignore that cry. Cain was confronted by God saying, “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). Ex 3,7-12; Is 5,7 and many other passages speak about the cry of innocent blood to which God will answer. As Nathan was sent to pronounce judgment on David (2 Sam 12), now Elijah was sent to Ahab.

With great enthusiasm and joy Ahab came to possess the land but he was shocked to see the prophet at the gate of vineyard. He asked, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” (1 Kg 21, 20). The voice of the prophet resounded in the air. He had no fear though he knew that he was standing in front of the king who could kill him. He was strengthened by the conviction that the kings and emperors are subject to God’s law and all are equal in the eyes of God. He proclaimed God’s message without diluting it or smoothening it up with sweet words. He would not allow anyone to dissuade him from fulfilling his mission.

Fearing the king, the people kept quiet. But, the prophet, responding to the cry of the innocent blood, took upon himself the mission of fighting for justice. Prophet is the voice of the voiceless; the voice of God against those who act wickedly. The voice of the prophet resounded in the air against Ahab, “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... for the anger to which you have provoked me... And of Jezebel the LORD also said, “The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel. Any one belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and any one of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat” (1 Kg 21, 23-24).

Ahab could not deny his crime as the Prophet was speaking in the very soil that was soaked by the blood of Naboth. Having no way to escape the responsibility of his crime, Naboth confessed his sin and asked God’s forgiveness. He repented as David did and the response of God came soon. He tore his clothes, covered himself in ashes. Taking pity on Ahab, God said, “Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days; but in his son’s days I will bring the evil upon his house” (1 Kg 21, 29).

The repentance of Ahab was momentary. Seeing that God had forgiven him, Ahab continued to act the way he did before. Hence, the punishment was executed in its full force. Though he disguised himself when he went to war with Syria, they recognized him and attacked him. As he ran back, they pierced him from behind. “So the king died, and was brought to Samaria; and they buried the king in Samaria. And they washed the chariot by the pool of Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood” (1 Kg 22, 37-38).

The judgment pronounced on Jezebel also was executed literally. Jehu who came into power through military revolution, killed the son of Ahab in the vineyard of Naboth (2 Kg 9, 24-26). According to the order of Jehu, Jezebel was thrown out of the terrace of the palace. “Some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, and they trampled on her. Then he went in and ate and drank; and he said, “See now to this cursed woman, and bury her; for she is a king’s daughter.” But when they went to bury her, they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. When they came back and told him, he said, “This is the word of the LORD, which he spoke by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, ‘In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as dung upon the face of the field in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, This is Jezebel’” (2 Kg 9, 30-37).

Can we say that our time is any better than that of Ahab and Elijah? Though the names changed, the idol worship seems to continue. In the place of Baal, there is Mammon who has promised all the luxury and comfort. In the name of personal freedom and convenience, millions of children are killed in the womb of mothers. Marriage and sex only in the context of marriage seems to be rejected as old ideas. Instead many seem to choose co-habitation. In the name of liquor, all kinds of poisons are sold. In the name of development thousands of families are evacuated and thrown on to the streets. Nobody seems to hear the cry of the poor and struggling mediocre families.

Where are the modern Elijah’s? Are they awaiting death in the desert? Or are they hiding in the caves of Horeb? The voice of the Lord resounds in the far corners of the world! Closing our ears to the voice of the Lord would bring about

total disaster. The soil soaked in the blood of the innocent and poor cry for justice. It has reached in the presence of the Lord. Would that be the cause of some of the frightening things that happen today? The change in the atmosphere, dangerous tornadoes, rising temperature, growing deserts, erupting volcanoes, earth quakes etc.

Do not tarry any longer. The Word of God compels us for total conversion. Accept the Word and proclaim it without fear. Do not compromise or dilute the power of the Word. The Lord asks, “Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?” (Jere 23, 29). We must proclaim the Word without fear as it is like a sharp knife in the hands of a surgeon (Heb 4,12). This is the invitation of the Lord who tells us not to be afraid as He is with us. Let us open our ears and obey his call, “Open your mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all who are left desolate. Open your mouth, judge righteously; maintain the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31, 8-9).

## 14 YOU ARE MINE!



*“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you”*

(Is 43,1-5).

The Babylonian Exile is not only a big event in the history of Israel, the people of God, but also a critical moment in the salvific saga. In BC 598, the army of Nebuchadnezzar, the Emperor of Babylon, conquered Jerusalem. The army looted the city and the Temple. More than 10,000 residents of Judea were taken prisoners and exiled to Babylon, imposing on them a huge amount as tribute (2 Kings 24,8-17). Thus began the Exile in Babylon.

The tragedies of the Israelites did not stop with these tribulations. After a few years, the king of Judea stopped giving tribute to Babylon. With the help of Egypt, Judea declared independence. False prophets unceasingly talked that Babylon would not come back and even if it did, the Israelites could resist it and defeat it. The king and the people believed the false prophets. The only person who realized that this was a Himalayan blunder was prophet Jeremiah. Accusing him of dousing the battle spirit of the people by his words, he was imprisoned. Babylon did come back. Not to conquer but to take revenge and ruin the land.

In 588 the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem. The resistance lasted more than a year. There was no food in the city. Hunger became rampant. People died of hunger and the people who were left, tried to remain alive by eating the carcass of the dead. Finally, the enemy broke down the wall and entered the city. What followed were a large-scale arson, looting, mayhem and massacre. The city of Jerusalem which was considered the House of the Lord was burnt down. A huge line of slaves could be seen moving to faraway Babylon abandoning the flaming city. They were led by king Zedekiah, who was made a slave after gouging out both his eyes and an iron chain put around his neck (2 Kg 24,1-17).

The people living in Babylon as slaves and those who

were left in Jerusalem now faced a huge crisis of faith. Why did things happen this way? Why the Lord, who extended his strong hands and released his people from slavery in Egypt, didn't lift even a finger to save his own city? Why did the Lord allow his people to be made slaves again? There were explanations galore.

Some people said that this generation is made to carry the collective sins of generations of Israelites and now they are being punished by God by giving them this defeat and the consequent exile. God is punishing those who breached the Covenant by using the rules of the Covenant itself. The feeling that there was no reason for any hope became widespread. The deities of Babylon seemed to them to have more power than the Lord God who could not protect his own home. There were also people who taught people that they should worship the Babylonian deities. Whatever might the interpretations be, the people were in deep despair. The heart-rending picture of this can be seen in the Book of Lamentations, "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! ... She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; ....Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me" (Lam 1,1-2; 12).

'Everything is finished. The Lord has completely abandoned us. There is nothing more to hope. We have lost our status as a people.' They thought like this. "Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me" (Is 49,14). This lamentation makes it clear how the defeated people felt in their hearts. To the people who were thus plunged in despair, God again sent another prophet. He was not sent to either accuse them or punish them, but to give them courage and console them with hope. The prophet is called the Second Isaiah. It is in the words of this prophet the forgiving love of God, his

overflowing affection and immeasurable compassion are seen most.

The picture of God that comes out of the words of this prophet is a different one, a hearty one. The prophecies that begin with "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40,1) are known as the Book of Comfort. It is in that book the compassion, consideration and strength of the Lord, who removes all fears from his people are most obvious. The exhortation "Don't Fear" is repeated here many times like the refrain in a psalm. The people were so much afraid and desperate.

The terrible tribulations the people suffer now are not the end of their life and history. This punishment does not indicate their end. All this is just a process of purification, punishment for the sins committed. After being purified in this cauldron of suffering, God will again accept them as his own people. It is this assurance and hope that are being given in these prophecies. Through many symbols, the love and protection of God is assured here.

Those who are in exile will be liberated again and brought back to the Promised Land. "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep" (Is 40,11). God is one who knows each individual personally, and has a clear idea about his abilities and disabilities, needs and troubles. Just like a shepherd, God will lead his people carefully, giving particular attention to everybody. When the sheep are led by the shepherd, they don't have to be afraid of anything. "He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless" (Is 40,29).

When the Lord is with you, there is no room for any fear. "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am

your God” (Is 41,10). God not only leads from the front, but he also holds our hand while walking. “For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, ‘Do not fear, I will help you’” (Is 41,13). From the phrase “I hold your hand” two observations can be made. (i) It is God who has held my hand. He will never leave it. If I am holding the hand of God my grip may get loose and I may trip or slip and fall. But since he has held my hand, I won’t fall. (ii) God is holding my right hand with his left hand. It means his right hand is free. It would imply that he can face any enemy or impediment without any hitch. Therefore I don’t have to fear at all.

There is a big lesson to learn from the collective experience of the Israelites as a whole and also from their individual experiences. It is a lesson that strengthens us with hope regarding the future. The Israelites had securely passed through the raging seas that could drown them, apart from so many other huge risks. They had also negotiated their way successfully through vast wilderness that could scorch them. The Red Sea, the Desert and Jordan – all these rouse memories about the dangers they overcame. The same thing will happen again. The Lord will walk with them (Is 43,2) because for God, the creator and protector, each individual, not only the Israelites, but you and me, is valuable. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ... Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you” (Is 43,1-4).

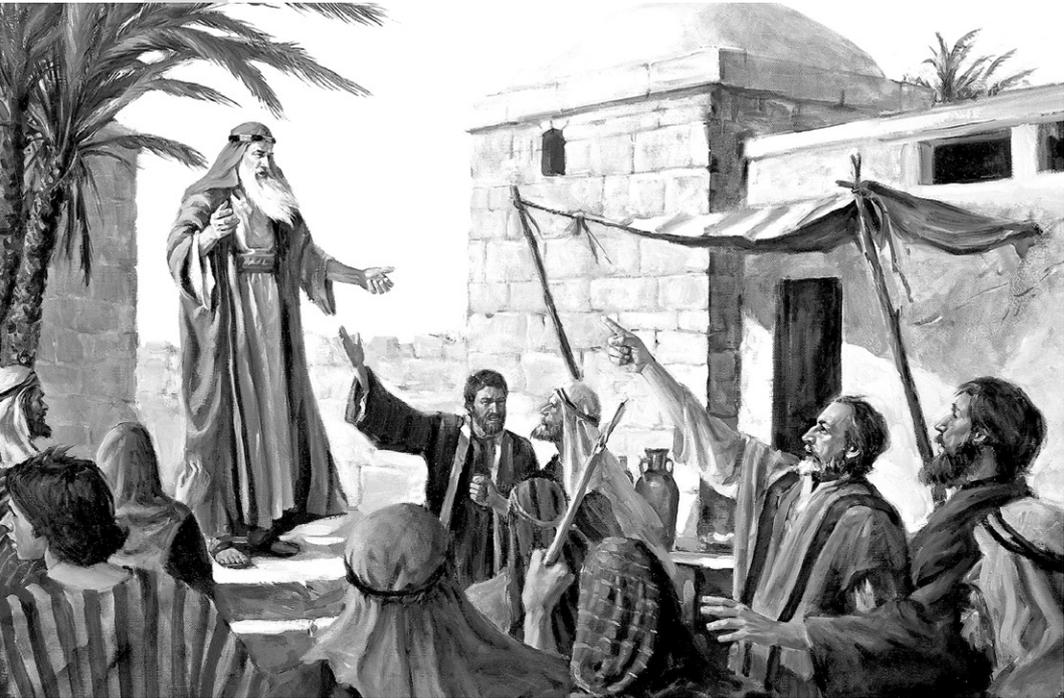
When your heart is quivering with fear because of the awareness of the sins you have committed, attracting the anger of God, listen to the voice of the Lord, “You will not be forgotten by me. I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist” (Is 44,21-22). Consider all the troubles, tribulations and torments that you suffer as part of the purification process. “See, I have refined you, but

not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity” (48,10).

When failures, diseases and different tribulations drag me into the boggy mire of despair, I ought to listen to the words of the Lord. “Can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands” (Is 49,5-16). The ideal example of nourishing and protective love among people, animals and birds is that of maternal love. It is God, who created human being as man and woman, in his own form and image, and placed maternal love in the woman. As the giver is greater than the gift, the love of God surpasses even maternal love. A mother may forget her child, but God will never forget.

God’s love never comes to an end. The great thing about it is that it does not depend on my reaction. Even if I don’t love God, he will love me. Even when I become unfaithful, God remains steadfast in his faith. It is the infinite, unwavering and never diminishing love of God that removes my fear and gives me courage. The Lord says, “For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you.” (Is 54,7-8). “The mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed” (54,10). It is this love that removes our fear. Let us believe without doubting, without wavering.

## 15 I AM WITH YOU!



*“Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you”*  
(Jere 1,8).

This prophetic mission was neither desired nor expected. Jeremiah, son of a priest in Anathoth, was a calm, quiet, and peace loving youth. Like his father, Jeremiah wanted to be just a priest, who had to perform the sacrifice when the lot fell to him, spending the rest of his time with his family in the village, doing whatever good he could do. But all his dreams about his future were toppled, when God intervened in his life. The youth, who was not yet twenty, was startled and stunned at the call. In fact he shook like a leaf in the wind because of fear.

The knowledge that he had been called to do this special service to God even before he was formed in the womb of his mother gave him not courage but embarrassment. When he came to know that he was going to be a prophet not merely for Israel but for all the peoples, he was prompted to confess his weakness and handicap. “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy”(1, 6). But he soon knew that all this is not defect in the eye of God. He was also given an indication of the significance of the responsibility he was to be entrusted with. When God touched his lips and placed the Word in his heart, he had no inkling about what it was all about. “See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (1,10).

Some terrible doom was going to befall the people. When Jeremiah came to know that his mission was to stand as a beacon above Jerusalem forewarning the people of the impending disaster he was really scared. He had an insight that he would be alone in his mission and he was to stand against all the evil powers. Then God assured him, “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” (1,18). Now the goal and nature of the call were crystal clear.

‘How can I be an iron pillar as I am so weak-hearted, like wax melting in the heat or leaves shaking in the wind?’, Jeremiah thought. ‘How can I, who is still a boy, face all the powers of the land simultaneously?’ God gave the reply to his doubts, “They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, to deliver you” (1,19).

The prophetic mission of Jeremiah lasted 40 years, starting in BC 626. Whenever he made of prophecy of a disaster he

was praying in his mind for such a thing not to happen, but he had the misfortune to see it happening with much greater intensity than he had predicted. In between his prophecies he had to suffer a lot – objections, ostracism, attacks, physical torture, inner conflicts! All these were far beyond the limits of a person's tolerance and patience. Naturally a weak-hearted person like Jeremiah often felt stumbling and staggering. But he never fell down because the Lord who had promised him protection kept his word.

Jeremiah's call to be a prophet happened to be at a period when the Israelites witnessed the greatest renovation of their faith. Josiah, who was appointed as the King in BC 640, started the process of this renovation. He destroyed the tents of worship and the idols in them. Worship of God was limited to Jerusalem. Through that he was plugging all the loopholes for worshipping different gods. He tried to enforce all the laws that were not enforced in the past and this included the law which asked people to write off all the debts owed to them during the Jubilee Year. The first mission of Jeremiah was to be a part of the renovation of the Yahweh faith. Jeremiah himself testifies to the fact that he did it to his utmost satisfaction, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart" (Jer 15,16).

The sweetness of his prophetic honeymoon did not last long. In 609 Josiah was killed. He lost his life at Megiddo as he was trying to stop the Pharaoh of Egypt who was rushing with a huge army to help the Assyrians. With that the religious renovation of Judah ended. Jeremiah also lost his days of peace. From then it was all a saga of suffering – oppositions, prohibitions, threats, and persecutions. In fact Jeremiah laments that his condition was very much like that of a young woman who was hoodwinked by her lover, who, pretending to

be in love with her, raped her and abandoned her to her fate. "O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed" (20,7).

On many occasions, Jeremiah felt that the Lord who had promised to protect him was not there to help in his dire need. He had to stand all alone against the king, priests and palace prophets. The Scroll of the Word he wrote was thrown into the fire by the king himself (Jer 36). They tried to kill him because he had predicted their ruin (Jer26,8). He was imprisoned for a long time (Jer37). He was thrown into a disused well (Jer38,1-13). He was often warned not to prophesy in the name of the Lord. To Jeremiah it was clear that the entire people, including the leaders, had turned against him. The messages given by God to be delivered to them were not those of peace and joy. On the contrary they were of utter ruin. No wonder, Jeremiah thought of giving up his prophetic mission.

As the result of his constant prophecies of disaster and doom, this is what he felt about himself, "I have become a laughing-stock all day long; everyone mocks me" (Jer20,8). Whenever he opened his mouth he had to speak of 'Violence and Destruction'. Because of these constant talks about danger, disaster and death, people started calling him with the nickname 'Violence and Destruction'. At one time he felt so bad and he thought, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name" (Jer20,9). But God did not allow him to run away from his mission. He did not realize that the Word God deposited in his heart, after touching his lips, was flaming coal. "Within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (Jer20,9).

Jeremiah becomes forced to speak and act against his will and wish. His heart is brimming with sorrow. He loves his

people, but when he imagines the disastrous tragedy that is going to befall them his heart gets broken. He knows this tragedy is avoidable, but what could he do with the stubborn people who bluntly and defiantly refused to transform themselves in spite of the dire consequences? This tension and inner conflict in him plunged him into mental conflict and the resultant gloom.

“My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent” (Jer4,19). He was stunned and flabbergasted at the disasters befalling his people. “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land, ‘Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?’” (Jer8,18-19). O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! O that I had in the desert a traveller’s lodging-place, that I might leave my people and go away from them!” (Jer9,1-2). But the prophet did not get any of these things. He had to carry out his mission to its very end!

The Prophet soon realized the Lord he had cried to had not abandoned him in spite of his anxieties, agony and anguish. Although he cried to the Lord like a baby sitting in its mother’s lap and murmuring and mumbling his complaints, he did not abandon his mission. God was always with him. When he was incarcerated God himself prompted the king to give him meals. When authorities wanted to kill him God prevented them from doing that (Jer26,7-24). The one pushed down into the mud in the cistern was lifted from there. Then finally, when the enslaved people moved into Babylon from the burnt city, over the crumbled walls, Jeremiah, released from the jail, was freed by the Babylon king.

God kept his word. He gave the prophet strength to stand

as an iron pillar and a bronze wall. God is faithful in his words. He won’t abandon you midway. He will not speak falsehood and give false promises which he does not intend to keep. Before entrusting a mission, God will show all the trials and tribulations the carrying out of the mission entails. From the one who accepts the call, God expects only one thing – fidelity, faithfulness.

There might be troubles. Tears might flow. Lamentations might rise. One can pledge that he won’t open his mouth in the Lord’s name. But the one, who swallowed the burning coal, could not keep his mouth shut. The prophet who accepted the divine call can’t keep quiet. He can’t bend the Word to suit the taste of the people. It is a challenge that the prophets face now and have faced in the past. He can’t pretend not to see the violence and injustice and the idolatry – known by various euphemistic terms - that are going on in the society. He can’t talk sweet things just to please people for his own selfishness, security and luxury. These are the trademarks of false prophets.

A Prophet must be able to proclaim loudly that if people, however big or small they might be, are not willing to transform themselves as per the holy laws given by God, their doom is inevitable. It may be for the protection of one’s life, for maintaining the purity of the home, or for the right of all people who are created by God to live comfortably on earth. It may be for uncovering and demolishing the masks worn by new idols. It may be for warning people, especially the youth, against the alluring power and temptations of the modern Delilahs.

Don’t try to abdicate your responsibility on the pretext being too young or having some weakness. We should recognize that the modern society is standing at the brink of far greater disasters than those of the Israelites of Jeremiah’s

time. A prophet has the responsibility of screaming, shouting, at the top of his voice to the people the bitter fruits of their avaricious greed and their desire to accumulate material things and also their indulgence in lascivious and lustful pleasures to the point of satiety. When you do such a prophetic mission, there is no need to fear that you will be left alone. The One who called you is with you. “I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you” (1,19).

## 16 THE WATCHFUL TREE



*“The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Jeremiah, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘I see a branch of an almond tree.’ Then the LORD said to me, ‘You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it’”*

(Jer 1,11-12).

He looked outside hearing the whistling of the wind. A tree was swaying in the storm. It was an almond tree. He felt as if the branches would break and fall to the ground. Around the tree there were some migrant folk. They had made a hearth with three stones and some gruel of broken wheat was boiling in a pot. A stone tilted a bit and the contents of the pot spilled on to the ground. In this incident there was nothing so extraordinary. But inside Jeremiah, who was stunned on hearing the call of the Lord, there erupted a flash.

It is the Hebrew word *'shakhed'* that is translated as Almond in English. It is formed from a verbal form. As a verb it means wake up, be awake, be alert, be careful and wait diligently. Maybe the almond tree wakes up from the freezing winter first, and that is why this name was given to it. Whatever might be the etymological interpretations, the meaning is clear, a tree that is alertly watching. This is the message the swaying almond boughs gave Jeremiah. There is no change in the Word of God. It will be fulfilled. For its fulfilment the Lord himself will take the initiative.

The tilting pot on the hearth was also significant. It was the stone on the southern side that moved away. So the pot tilted from north to south. This created the startling awareness. "Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land" (Jer 1,14-15). These two scenes showed Jeremiah who had been chosen to be a prophet of the people even before he was born, what he had to say to the people. For Jeremiah, the following days were of terrible fear and intense internal conflicts. The tragedies to unleash hunted the young mind day and night.

"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"

(Jere 4,23-24). The prophet could not keep quiet as he saw the impending judgment with all its horrendous consequences. He realized that his mission was to proclaim to people his conviction that the Word of the Lord would be fulfilled. And he did that. But it was not merely about the impending disaster that the prophet had to speak. Jeremiah realized that God who waits diligently is not bent upon wanton destruction but on cleansing, purification.

In BC 598, the Babylon army attacked Judea. Many were taken prisoners and were taken to Babylon. The victors collected heavy tributes from the vanquished. Thus the tragedy revealed to the prophet as the disaster from the north did materialize. The people who had thought it was all over with this one terrible tragedy were grossly mistaken. After two years Babylon was engaged in a war with Media in the East. Thinking that the Babylonians won't come back as they were busy elsewhere, the leaders of Judea stopped giving them tribute. They got into an alliance with Egypt. They fondly thought they could resist the Babylonians if they ventured to come back. Many soothsayers backed this view. They went a step ahead and predicted that all the prisoners and the booty the Babylonians had taken away with them would be brought back to Judea.

In the circumstances Jeremiah's was a solitary voice. He screamed hoarse, at the top of his voice, that challenging Babylonia would be suicidal and wrought with disastrous consequences. But the authorities in Judea turned a deaf ear to his predictions. Jeremiah was branded a spy of the Babylonians. He was physically beaten up (Jer 20,2), incarcerated and threatened with death (Jer26), followed by an attempt on his life (Jer38). But these were not all the message that Jeremiah received from the boughs of the swaying almond tree.

The prophet had dreamed of a bright future beyond the

ruin of Jerusalem and the consequent exile. He knew that he was not a prophet of mere destruction, demolition and doom, but also of reconstruction and growth. This awareness came out as a prophecy about the new Covenant. “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer 31,31-33). This is the promise of God. Those who did not heed to the warning suffered the punishment. In 588 the Babylon army returned and laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. At the end of the siege after 1½ years they demolished the fortress and occupied the city. They burned down the temple. Thousands were made prisoners and exiled. But that was not the end of everything. The people purified by punishment will be again favoured and blessed by God.

The New Covenant has some special features. It will be written in the heart. The injunctions of the Covenant are not coming from outside; they are not commandments written on stone tablets. They will be inner persuasions given by God. It is the document of the Spirit written on the heart. That Covenant will be unconditional and permanent. To follow it meticulously, God himself will give the necessary strength. It will never be cancelled.

The picture of the almond tree gives us the assurance that God himself will be alert to fulfil this promise. Jeremiah believed that. That belief became the source of his strength, and hope. Even after 27 centuries, the strength and hope of that Prophetic Vision continues to instil hope and strength into millions of believers. For Jeremiah who witnessed the swaying almond tree and the tilting pot on the hearth, which were not extraordinary things, they became the means for his

revelation. It may be through seemingly trivial, unimportant, and insignificant happenings that God gives us his revelations. To recognize them we should be alert, keeping our eyes and ears open.

God may enter our lives not through ways we would expect. God does not intervene in history by doing mind-boggling and miraculous things to grab people’s attention. The withering grass, ceasing fountains and drying streams might be symbols, foreboding impending doom. In the same way the blooming flowers, the innocent babies and the smiling faces might be symbols to recognize the never ending salvific love of God our Father. It is from divine providence, the alert tree standing aloft with its benevolent shade, we get the realization that love is more potent than hatred and life immensely mightier than death.

That is the message of the alert tree, the almond tree. So, don’t be afraid. Believe in the Lord firmly. “Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known” (Jer 33,3).

“Surely I know the plans I have for you...plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me” (Jer29,11-14)

## 17 THE LORD DOES SEE



*“Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, “O eternal God, you know what is secret and are aware of all things before they come to be; you know that these men have given false evidence against me. And now I am to die, though I have done none of the wicked things that they have charged against me!” The Lord heard her cry. Just as she was being led off to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice, “I want no part in shedding this woman’s blood!”*

(Susanna 1, 42-46)

She was the synonym for purity – Susanna. The name itself means ‘without blemish’. Her life was quite in keeping with the spirit of her name. Her parents had made her well-versed in the

Laws of Moses. She was meticulously practicing what she had learned. The purity of her soul made her body scintillatingly beautiful. She was the wife of Joachim, who was one of the Israelites exiled into Babylon. Susanna had a personality respected by everyone. Her behavior was exemplary and noble. She was a model for showing hospitality. In spite of all this, it happened - something that should never have happened.

Many visitors used to come to the home of Joachim. A part of the house was used as a court. Those who have complaints would come here. The Judges give their verdicts. But this time the verdict the people heard stunned them. The judgment was against Susanna whom they had considered an ideal housewife, home-maker in modern parlance, and a holy person. Death penalty! The crime? Adultery! The judges themselves gave witness against her, saying that they had witnessed the crime. Their testimony was valid in the eyes of the law. The two judges were the accusers, they were the witnesses and they were also the judges. The people who heard the accusation bowed their heads in shame. This is what the judges had to say. They were walking in the garden. Susanna came there. She sent away her maids and closed the door to the garden. A young man who was hiding in the garden lay with her. When they saw this happening, they shouted and ran to the spot where this heinous crime was taking place. But by the time they reached the place, the young man, the culprit, had fled.

It was a situation where no other witness was there. The people were forced to accept the description of the events by the judges. Susanna was caught in straightjacket. There was no one to argue for her. She was not even given a chance to present her side of the argument. Neither did anybody ask her. The judgment was immediate. Stone her to death! There was nothing more to expect from the judges. There was only one thing left for the hapless Susanna to do, the one getting

punished for a crime she did not even think to commit: Cry! She raised her voice and cried loudly saying that she was innocent.

Susanna is a person who dominates the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Daniel. This book was written in the beginning of the second century and this is one of the many important incidents recorded there. The main aim of this Book was to ward off the encroachment of the Greek culture in a way as not to lose the originality and essence of the Israeli faith and also to resist temptations and persecutions. In the first six chapters of the book, it is exemplified how God miraculously saves all those who are faithful to the law of the Covenant and are ready to accept persecutions and even death for keeping such faith. Chapter 7-12 describes the end of the age in an apocalyptic manner. There also people are exhorted to stand firm in their faith. Even by paying the price of one's life, the Law of God should be obeyed. Through the story of Susanna God is giving the message that God will save those who are even ready to die obeying His laws.

The judges who were captivated by the beauty of Susanna tried their best to make Susanna bend to their lascivious desires. They were waiting for an opportune moment. The session in the court-house was over. Susanna went to the garden as usual. The judges had hidden themselves in the garden. The moment the maids of Susanna closed the door of the garden and went out, the judges approached her and asked her to lie with them. They also threatened that if she refused to cooperate with them, they would accuse her of adultery and get her stoned to death. Susanna had no way to escape but she decided it was better to die than submit to lust of the judges. She screamed at the top of her voice. She did that because she was certain there was somebody up who would hear her. When people came running, the judges told them their concocted story. The next

day the court was held and they gave their verdict. Susanna would be led to the killing ground to be stoned to death.

Susanna, however, was not flustered. She firmly believed that her God would not abandon her. Even if she had to die she would not sin. Then death itself will be an entry into the presence of God. She cried again loudly proclaiming her innocence. Then she placed herself in the hands of God who sees everything. Let Him do what He likes, she told herself!

Soon it was proved that God won't abandon those who have faith in him. God sees everything. That is why we call Him Omnipresent, Omniscient and Omnipotent. He will interfere when the time is ripe. On her way to the place of execution, divine interference came through a boy. Daniel. It means "God is my Judge". He questioned the judgment against her. The judgment was given without proper trial, without the requisite evidence and the accused was none other than an exemplary housewife who was considered pious and respectable. It was the two judges who accused her, gave evidence against her and passed the judgment on her. What kind of authority does such a verdict have? Can the people believe such judges?

The people realized their folly. They all went back to the court. The judges were put on trial. Daniel tried them. They were forced to confess their crime with their own tongue. The people gave the unjust judges the very same punishment which they had imposed on the innocent Susanna. The all-seeing God intervened at the right time and justice was carried out. The innocent was let free, but the unjust judges received their apt punishment.

This story has some very significant messages. Faith is to be protected at any cost. God's commandments should be meticulously obeyed. God will help those who try to do that. This is the most obvious lesson. Marital fidelity and sexual

purity are also focal points of the story. In the modern period when family relations are getting broken and the carnal desires go beyond all reasonable bounds, Susanna stands tall like a tower of light. “I am completely trapped,” Susanna groaned. “If I yield, it will be my death; if I refuse, I cannot escape your power. Yet it is better for me not to do it and to fall into your power than to sin before the Lord” (Dan 13,22-23). What she entrusted to the Lord, the Lord kept it secure. This is another aspect of the story.

The story of Susanna also tells us how the justice system can degenerate and how carnal desires can make men worse than brutes. The Elders were chosen as judges to make people walk the path of God and also to ensure that justice and righteousness reign in the land. But the judges let themselves fall so low and without mercy and fear of God they decide to get an innocent person killed. This is a travesty of justice and the situation can only be described as horrendous.

The theme described in this incident recorded, 2200 years ago, does not limit itself to this single one. There is also a great warning here which God wants to give to the persons who are appointed to lead the people. This warning should not escape us. God who sees everything also sees our innermost thoughts and intentions. So we ought to be careful. Those who accuse the innocent, judge and ruin the helpless, however high a niche they might occupy, will have to face get the supreme Judge and receive the punishment from His hands. So let us rely on God without fear. Let us tread His path. Those who deviate should be afraid.

## 18 IN THE VALLEY OF DEATH



*“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff - they comfort me”*

(Ps 23,4).

Man finds God through his everyday experiences. Those who keep an open heart with no prejudices can make each of their experiences a divine one. The early fathers of the Israelites were shepherds. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and then the Fathers of the 12 Tribes were all shepherds. Moses, who liberated the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt, too was a shepherd. The greatest King and the Father of all the future Kings – David – was also a shepherd. For all of them God was their shepherd.

It is natural that a people who maintain the tradition of shepherds will look at God who guides them as a shepherd. They realized that God guides them just like a good shepherd leads his sheep. Psalm 23 is a prayer song that announces this faith. The psalm which begins with the assertion that “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” stresses the sense of reliance on God.

Many people consider this psalm as the most beautiful among the 150 psalms. Many remember it by heart and recite it often. In this, the theme is not merely the relation between God and the Israelites, but the deep and personal relation of each individual with God. In this we see the abundant flow of compassionate love which not only supplies our needs but also protects us from all kinds of dangers. To understand the concept of the psalm better, it is good to know the historical background of the psalmist.

The valley of River Jordan is an area where green grass grows abundantly. There will be Plenty of grass for the sheep; good, clean, drinking water in the river. But there are dangers lurking on the banks. There are lions and wolves nearby and they form a constant threat to the sheep. There are thieves that come to steal the sheep. Jordan River flows through the valleys of high hills. The shadows of the rocks will be always falling on the banks of the river. This shadow was considered symbolic of the danger that could appear any time. Thus in the poetic imagination, the banks of the river with abundant green grass and pure water became a valley where lurked the shadow of death.

It is here that the faith of the psalmist is made evident. The Lord is grazing the sheep. No wild animal can do them any harm. No thief can carry them away. Normally the sheep eat the grass quickly and fill their stomachs. They do that because

they do not know when the wild animals will turn up. They fill their stomach and then they stay in a sheltered place and chew the cud. But here on the green meadow the sheep are resting. Since the Lord is the shepherd they don't have to be afraid of anything. So they are not in any haste.

A shepherd usually carries two sticks or rods with him. One of them is a long one with a curve at one end. This is known as the shepherd's rod. The shepherd uses it to support him while he ascends and descends steep hills. Not only that, he could use that like a sheep hook to bring into line any lamb or sheep that goes astray or to bring into the fold any sheep that goes out of it. The second stick is actually a weapon. It is like a club that he can use against predatory wild animals or thieves. This is known as the club or rod. The stick is held in hand, the club is hung on the shoulder.

In the background of the symbols we can understand the fearlessness of the psalmist. Although he is passing through risky circumstances where dangers of all sorts lurk, he is not afraid of anything as he has relied on the Lord. To prevent him from going astray, there is the sheep-hook of the shepherd. The Lord is mighty enough to protect him from any danger. There he can live in peace and contentment without worrying about anything or anybody.

The psalmist stresses one thing as the sole basis of his fearlessness. “Since the Lord is with him” he is not afraid. Why should he be afraid when the Almighty Lord is with him? It is not the faith of David alone that lived 3000 years ago, but it is a truth applicable to all of us. We should be constantly aware that the Lord is with us.

One of the features of God revealed through the Bible is his abiding presence always accompanying us. In the Paradise he walked with our first parents. When they got out of the

Paradise because of their recalcitrant disobedience, he came seeking for them. Emmanuel is a very apt name for God as it means 'one who dwells with us'. It was a promise (Is 7,14), a promise that was fulfilled in Jesus (Mt 1,23). Where two or three people congregate in his name, he will be among them (Mt 18,20). He was walking with the disciples, burdened with pain, sorrow and despair, swallowing their abject defeat, arguing and lamenting, on their way to Emmaus. Then their fear vamoosed. Their pain was obliterated. They prayed, "Lord, stay with us!"

This is what happens even today. We must know that he is with us; we should believe that he is with us. Not only that, we should try to walk with him. Only if we follow him the way he guides us, we will be able to live fearlessly. He is with us. We should always endeavour to be with him. Then no foe can make us fearful. Even though we are treading the valley with the shadow of death, we don't have to be afraid. The good shepherd who leads us is capable of leading us to eternal life, eternal joy beyond death. He had sacrificed his life so that we could have life abundantly. He had resurrected with greater power and it is he who says, "Do not be afraid!" (Jn 10,10-18). Therefore along with the psalmist let us also say, "I won't be afraid as you are with me."

## 19 TERROR OF THE NIGHT



*"You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day"*

(Ps 91,5).

I did not decide on that journey with any will or enthusiasm. When the priest, my close friend, compelled me I felt reluctant to say 'No'. When I started that journey in the car, I never imagined it would plunge me into such a horrible disaster. I remember everything as if it took place just yesterday. That car accident shocked me so much and even now it gives me goosebumps when I think of it. It was on 23 December 1970. I was

studying in Rome. It was usual for me to go to assist in some church in Italy during the Christmas holidays. This year I was getting ready to go to a small village near the town of Como in Northern Italy, close to the Alps Mountain ranges, to assist the parish priest during the Christmas celebrations. I had booked my train ticket in advance.

Two days before my proposed journey, my friend Fr. Joseph Kappil called me and said to me, “Four of us are going to various parishes in Northern Italy for services. We will be very happy if you can join us. We will be going in a car.” They had bought a car with the money they got by working in a factory in Germany during the summer holidays. The car was not an ordinary one, it was a Mercedes Benz. There was only one hitch - it was not a new car. It was a very old one. Fr. Joseph was an expert driver. He was also in the forefront for any kind of adventure. Two years ago from Rome he had gone to London and back to Rome via Lourdes on an old Vespa scooter, covering more than 6000kilometers. He had also driven a lot.

So when he insisted that I must accompany him, I agreed without much ado. The train ticket was cancelled and I went with the group. We started our journey from Rome later than we had planned. It was when we were on the road, that the frailties of the old Benz car began to exhibit themselves one after the other. Two of our friends were soon taken to the parishes they were supposed to go. It was getting late. We three were left in the car. I had thought that we would reach Milan by evening and then I could take a train to my parish and reach there before 10 in the night. But this plan would not work out. When we left the town of Alexandria it was past 8 p.m. Under normal circumstances from there it would take only less than two hours to reach Milan. So I thought I would spend the

night with friends and then in the morning I could proceed to my parish. With this thought, we continued the journey.

I was driving. After about ten minutes, the visibility got low. There was heavy mist. The temperature plunged below -10. The heating system in the car was dysfunctional. Getting frozen inside was not the problem. The various glasses in the car started getting covered with ice. I could see only the tail lights of the vehicles going in front and the headlights of the vehicles coming from the opposite direction. I moved the car to one side and after stopping, I handed over the steering wheel to my friend. He managed to crawl through for another 15 minutes and then he too gave up. It was around 9 then. There was a distance of another 150 kilometers to reach Milan.

In ten minutes we were convinced that it was impossible to park on the side of the road and wait till the morning. In spite of the harsh conditions, vehicles were speeding with even 150 kilometers per hour. There was every possibility that one of them might crash into our car. In Northern Italy there is the auto-strada. In these fast tracks, two vehicles can move parallel in the same direction. If there is an accident, one can stop in the third track. Then there is the emergency track. When we spent 10 minutes in the emergency track, we realized that it was suicidal to stay there. We had to move forward. Fr. Jose was unwilling to drive. Finally I decided to be at the steering wheel. Very slowly, and with great caution, I drove for almost half an hour.

Then the thing we feared happened. We heard Screaming horns from behind, deafening noises of a vehicle braking suddenly, then a collision. We were hit. I could not control the vehicle. I pressed the brake pedal to the maximum, level with the floor. Still I felt the vehicle was moving forward. I told my friends to open the door and jump out. The doors were

opened and then! Phew! Our car was standing still! We felt the car was on the move because of the fast moving traffic and the dazzling lights. When we got out we realized the extent of the disaster we were in. We were on a bridge over the River Po. The impact of the collision had made the car turn aside, striding both the main tracks. Just behind us there was the huge lorry that had hit us.

As we were standing stunned and flabbergasted, the lorry driver strutted towards us, commanding. “This is a bridge. Remove your car immediately. Clear the road. We’ll talk further on the matter after moving out of the bridge.” We knew things were not going well. So we noted down the number of the lorry. Although the back of the car was smashed, the wheels could still move. By the time we tried to straighten the car and bring it to our track, the lorry vanished. I drove the rest of the 50 kilometers with extreme care, following a lorry with its tail lights moving in front. By the time we reached the toll gate it was 1 a.m. Until morning we rested inside the car.

The 24<sup>th</sup> December dawned with the sun getting colder. We got the car started by pushing it. The Insurance Company assessed that the repair charges would be more than the cost of the vehicle and so they decided to take the car after giving us a certain amount. It took two weeks for this decision. At the end of it all, the collision proved to be a financial gain. The Insurance Company paid us 25% more than the amount for which it was bought!

This incident remains ever fresh in my memory. Whenever I think of it, the Word I quoted at the beginning of this chapter (Ps 91,5) comes to my mind. All the three of us could have ended up at the bottom of the Po River on the previous night of 1970 Christmas. The terror of the night confronted us that day in the form of a heavily loaded lorry. Maybe our tail

light was not working or the driver of the lorry might have failed to notice it in the thick mist. If he had not braked hard, certainly our car would have plunged into the bottom of the river flowing below. Again it was mere luck, a miracle I should say, that no vehicle came that way when our car was sitting astride both the tracks blocking them. We can only say, “God saved us!”

The psalmist talks about the terror of night to indicate the powers of evil. This fear starts with the wild animals prowling in the night on the lookout for their prey (Ps 104, 19-20). It is this experience that makes people think of the night as the reveling time for the powers of evil. The concept of the arrows flying by the day must have emanated from the background of sunstrokes. Whatever may be the source or origin of these images, the message conveyed by God is clear, “Don’t be afraid! The hand of God will protect you.” Don’t forget to seek God’s protection at the beginning of your journeys and to thank God at their successful completion. Remember that life itself is a journey and we all need God’s mercy and compassion at each step of our lives.

## 20 SUPPORTING HANDS



*“For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone”*

(Ps 91, 11-12).

We have prayed this Psalm so many times. It is part of the Morning Prayer of the Syro Malabar Church. The tempter quoted these words when he challenged Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the Temple. However, I never experienced the power and depth of these words as I did in an afternoon in October 1971.

My classmate, Rev. Fr. George Arackapadavil presented an idea. We were studying in Rome, staying in Collegio

Nepomuceno that belonged to the Church of Czechoslovakia. About 70 Kilometers away from Rome there is a famous park called Tivoli. Not far from the park, one of our friends, Rev. Fr. Mathew Thondamkuzhy was working in a parish. He was in the process of completing his Doctoral Thesis. Since the scholarship allowed from Rome had finished, he was staying in a parish. All he had to do was offer Mass in the morning and help with the Sunday Masses. In return he would get room and board free. We had to travel only an hour and a half to reach there. We planned to visit him, have supper and then return.

Fr. George had another aim for planning this venture. He had brought a small car. It was a Fiat 500, the smallest car on the road now and then. Affectionately it is called “bug”. He paid Rs. 1000.00 for this second hand car. It had only two doors but four people could travel in it. He could drive 25 KM for a litter of Petrol for which the rate was only Re.1.00.

Though Fr. George had taken the license from India, he was not used to driving in Rome. Hence, he hoped that he could use this trip for gaining some driving experience. Since we were going in the afternoon, it will be day time and there will not be too much traffic. So the plan was that he would drive to Tivoli and since it would be dark and there would be heavy traffic when returning I should do the driving. Thus after Lunch, at about 2.00 PM, four of us started the trip.

Everything went fine. On the way we saw Tivoli Park, filled with beautiful fountains, various trees and flowers. We continued the journey on the main road. Upon seeing the sign pointing to our destination, I asked him to slow down but he pressed on the accelerator instead of the brake pedal. He was going about 80 KM speed even when reached the turn. Though I asked him to apply the break, he continued in full

speed and turned right. There was a field about 20 feet below and there was a fence to keep the vehicles from falling down. Not to go into the field he turned left where there was a wall. Not to hit the wall, he again turned right. His foot was still on the accelerator. We do not know what happened after that.

When we opened our eyes, we could see nothing. A few moments later, we realized that the car was standing upside down in the field. We could not open the door as it had become jammed. We were wondering how to get out when we heard a voice saying “come out through the front”. Two young people who got shocked by our gymnastics, stopped the scooter and came down to the field. The windshield had shattered and so all three of us got out without a scratch.

Fr. George was lying under the steering wheel. We wondered if something happened to him. When we asked him to come out, he responded, “Do not rush me. Let me rest a little before coming out. Glad that none of us were hurt. All three of them were sent by line bus to Fr. Mathew. We called a workshop in Rome and I traveled to Fr. Mathew in the rented car they brought. The workshop bought the crumbled car for Rs. 50.00 which was considered as the payment for coming to the spot with a rented car.

When I think of the incident, I still shiver. The car had turned many times before landing in the field. The petrol tank had burst and the area was soaked in petrol. A spark of fire would have been enough to burn all of us to ashes. But, none of us were hurt. Who protected us? I came to deeper awareness of the protection the Lord promised through Ps. 91. I still remember it with deep gratitude.

There is no doubt that it was the hand of the Lord that protected us when we were having the accident. It is this care that is communicated when the Psalmist says that the Lord

would command the Angels and they will support us in their hands. It is the hand of the Lord that supports us and protects us every moment from all possible dangers. It is because of this support that we are going around safely and happily. The very hands that protect us at the time of accident safeguard us from having accidents.

When we reach our destination safely, after every trip, we must remember with gratitude the Lord who supported us and protected us. Our very life is a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage to heaven, our eternal home! On the way there might be hidden accidents, dangerous turns and pitfalls. Let us not forget that it is the powerful hands of the Lord that protect us and support us every moment of our lives. Each morning let us pray Psalm 91 with a little more attention and gratitude.

## 21 IN THE SINKING BOAT



*“Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm”*  
(Mt 8,26).

None of the apostles who entered the boat with Jesus might have imagined that he would be caught in such a mess. The words of the Guru had given them great joy. His miraculous actions had made them wonderstruck. Therefore they did not waste any time thinking about anything when he told them to accompany him and get across the sea. They entered the boat readily with him. It was a place which was quite familiar to

them – the Sea of Galilee. They knew its each nook and corner. They had spent their entire life there. But they had never faced such a risk earlier in their lives.

The appellation “Sea” to Galilee is a mere adornment, even a misnomer. It is just 25 km long and 13 km broad and it is just an enclosed, internal lake. But it is called the Sea of Galilee. It is in Galilee which is the northern province of Palestine and it came to be known as the Sea of Galilee. In Syriac language, Galilee is Gleela. Herod Antipas built a city at the south-western bank of the Lake to honour the Roman Emperor Tiberius and named it Tiberias. He moved the capital to Tiberias and therefore the Lake came to be known as Tiberias Lake. As the upper part is wider and the lower part narrower, the Lake has the shape of a lute. It is from the Hebrew word for a lute the name Gennezareth came. This Lake which was thus known by 4 different names had a big specialty.

This Lake is surrounded by tall hills. Between the hills there is a gap. It is through this gap that the River Jordan flows from the north to the south. Through this gap through which the river flows, there often come powerful winds. Such winds make the Lake form huge waves. The Lake which is quite calm in normal circumstances becomes frighteningly ferocious and perilous then. The mountainous waves will vehemently rock the boats. It is one such incident that is reported in the three synoptic Gospels. Although the Apostles who were rowing the boat were well experienced boatmen, they thought they were running the risk of their life right then as the Lake was in convulsive commotion.

The boat was rocking in the mighty storm. The Apostles felt that it might capsize any moment. Even at that time their Guru was sleeping peacefully resting his head on a pillow in the stern of the boat. The Apostles did not understand how their Guru

could do that. How could their master be so inconsiderate, so callously indifferent, when they were on the verge of drowning in the sea? So they called their Guru and made him awake. Their cries, as recorded by Mark, are indicative of their anger and agony at the indifference of their Master. “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mk 4,38).

The Teacher woke up. He rebuked the wind. The sea became calm. After that he asked his Apostles why they were afraid (Mk 4,40). That also they did not understand. Who won't be afraid when their boat is caught in the mighty wind and is rocking from side to side? But there were certain important things they had cleanly forgotten. **1.** It was their Teacher who had asked them to accompany him in the boat. They definitely know that they embarked on this journey on the instruction of their Teacher. They should have believed that since they started this journey on the instruction of their Master, he would also protect them from any danger. **2.** If the boat capsized, not only they, but their Teacher would also drown. They should have known that although their Master was sleeping in the stern, he was capable of overcoming any impediment in their way. And if they had known it, they should have recollected it at this juncture.

Therefore, there is no need to fear. If the Master is on the boat, it will definitely reach the shores. There may be risks on the way. The impediments might look insurmountable at times. But then I must remember that the one sitting at the stern of my lifeboat is none other than the Lord and Master of the wind and sea. The Master himself gives out one of the reasons for the doubt and fear of his Apostles when he asks, “Don't you have faith” (Mk 4, 40). Matthew presents this idea in another way. In the address Jesus makes calling the Apostles “Ye of little faith” we can detect the basic reason for their fear.

Jesus points out here that lack of faith is the basic reason for their fear. Why should I be afraid when the Lord who created me and sustains me is with me? Nothing will happen to me without his knowledge and sanction. Therefore I should realize that whatever happens to me happens for my welfare. Then I won't be afraid in spite of any mighty storm. When the Lord is with me nothing bad will happen to me. Maybe because Jesus wanted to give this conviction to his Apostles he unleashed the mighty storm rocking the boat perilously as he himself was asleep in the stern. When the wind and sea calmed down, the Apostles recognized the power of their Master. Just as the sea became calm, their minds too regained their composure. Mark and Luke depict this incident as an experience that all disciples of Jesus should have. Matthew goes a step further and gives the incident a meaning at another level too, relating it to the Church and also the end of age.

Both Mark and Luke use the word ‘*lailaps*’ to mean storm. That is the apt word in normal circumstances. But Matthew has used the word ‘*seismos*’ which means earthquake. This is not an ordinary storm or whirlwind. When the evangelist says that what happened was an earthquake capable of annihilating everything in its wake, it is obvious that he intends to give an important message.

This is not just one of those quotidian experiences in the lives of the Apostles. The evangelist presents this incident in such an awesome way as to generate anxiety in the minds of people about the very existence of the Church of Christ in the annals of the world. In the history of the Church there have been many dreadful crises. The very first of its kind was the one which the Church encountered when it began to accept the Gentiles into its fold. It caused differences of opinion and even bitter clashes between Peter and Paul, the two strong stalwarts

of the Church (Gal 2,11-14). This crisis was overcome in the First Ecumenical Council of Jerusalem. The crisis was akin to an earthquake that was capable of shattering the Church from the inside.

It is noteworthy to observe that the crisis of faith happened during the journey to get across the Sea of Galilee. The evangelization journey from the familiar shores of the Israelites to the Gentiles can be seen as the journey across the Sea. After this incident, Jesus and the Apostles reach the land of the Gerasenes where unclean spirits and demoniacs held sway. In the earthquake of the Sea of Galilee one can have an indication of the evil spirits that the Evangelists were going to face in the new land.

This incident reminds each one of us that our journey is a voyage to reach the other side of the sea. That journey is through paths where mighty storms lurk and unclean spirits make their deadly dances without any restraining fetters and manacles. The journey has to go on until we reach our paternal home. If we are to reach our haven without fear, without panicking, two things are essential. One is to know that Jesus is with us. We must know that we are travelling with Jesus. The second thing is faith in Jesus. We should place our lives in his protective, powerful hands. We should strongly believe that we are safe in them. In the question Jesus poses to the Apostles, there is a call for us to relinquish all our doubts and diffidence and grow in perfect faith and utter dedication. “Ye of little faith, why are you afraid?” When we believe, there will be calm and composure – in the hearts and in the society.

## 22 THE SAVING FAITH



*“Daughter, take heart! Your faith has healed you” (Mt 9,22).*

That woman must have never imagined that she was heading for such a disaster. She had only one desire, get relief from the disease that has been tormenting her body and mind for the last 12 years. “Nobody should know that I am sick. Without being noticed by anybody, somehow, anyhow, I should reach the guru and touch the hem of his cloak.” This is how the woman thought. She believed that by touching the hem she would be healed. The things she heard about the guru fortified her faith. It was with this strong faith that she touched the hem of the cloak of Jesus.

Her faith was repaid in abundance. The disease troubling her for 12 long years left her immediately. She knew that. “I can now return home happily, gratefully, and peacefully. I should go back as I came, without letting anyone notice me,” she thought. But then came the rude shock. A thunderous voice was asking, “Who touched my cloak?” It was like a bolt from the blue for the woman. She was flabbergasted, stupefied with shock. The people who heard the question understood nothing. The Apostles thought it was a joke by Jesus.

“Who hasn’t touched you? What is the relevance of asking ‘Who touched me?’ when people are milling around you?” This is how the apostles thought. But the healed woman knew Jesus was not joking. She realized that it was impossible to hide from the eyes of the guru who was looking around to see the person who touched his cloak. “What now? What punishment am I going to get?” she thought. In her Jewish mind the sense of guilt penetrated deeper as she realized that she had done a horrendous mistake.

She knows the law well that people like her are not supposed to go out of the house. In the Book of Leviticus there are clear indications about the impurity of a woman caused by hemorrhages. “If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, for all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean” (Lev 15,25). The law continues to say that the bed she lies on, the seat she sits on, the path she treads, the things she touches and things touching her will all become impure. The law, therefore, asks such women to stay alone, within the four walls of the room. “I have breached that law. The guru has noticed it too,” she thought. The recognition that her mistake would be made public made her panicky.

She did not do it with any malicious intention of making anybody impure by her touch. She has spent a whole fortune to get cured but the disease had been pestering her for the last 12 years. The treatment was only making things worse and not better. She just wanted to be free from her malady. “Is it a big mistake to hope for a cure? The guru could have let me go away as I had come, unnoticed. But, then, why this drama? I don’t know whom all I might have touched and made impure in my efforts to come to the guru. I had been pushing and pulling and elbowing my way through the milling crowd to come near the guru. Did I make the guru also impure by my touch?” the woman thought.

“What is the remedy? What punishment the guru is going to give me? It is possible that he may sentence me to be killed by throwing stones as I have made so many people impure by my touch. There is nothing I can do except accept my fate. But before I am punished I must do one thing. I must openly speak of my history before all the people who are here. There is nothing to hide now. I must speak about all the troubles and tribulations, ostracism, ridicule, exploitations from medical quacks and greedy apothecaries and futile experiments I have undergone. Let everybody know. No other woman should have a tragic fate like mine,” she thought.

“I will be speaking not only my bitter experiences. I will also talk about the things I heard about Jesus, how the news kindled my hope like the dying wick flames at the dollop of oil poured on it, the troubles I took to come here, the fear I had to overcome, the adventure I embarked on, all this I will say. Not only that. I should also say how I was healed from the disease that tormented me for 12 years by a mere touch on his hem. The medical men had failed to do anything to help me, in spite of the expensive treatments they tried on me. What a miracle that I am cured by a mere touch. After

listening to my confession let the Master or the society give me any punishment.” It was with determination that she came forward and prostrated before Jesus.

Fear hadn't left her as she was stupefied, stunned and startled at the voice of the Master. Did the Master want to insult her publicly for the wrong she had done? Did he want the people there to know she was suffering from this disease? Whatever might be, she told the guru the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth. The Gospel does not speak about her inklings at this time but it says she was afraid and trembled with fear. “The woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth” (Mk 5,33).

But then, lo and behold! The words of the Master floated to her as solace, encouragement and peace. “He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease’” (5,34). She did not know that Jesus was on his way to heal the daughter of Jairos, the leader of the synagogue. The girl was dying and Jesus was rushing to heal her. But this interruption proved costly. The girl died. The servants came to tell Jesus that there was no point in rushing to Jairos's house as the girl has already breathed her last. It was now the healed woman realized the gravity of the situation. But she did not notice even an iota of dislike or anger in the words of her healer.

In that endearing call “Daughter”, all her anxieties and worries, inferiority complex and despair vamoosed like dew drops at the sunshine, like darkness in front of light. It was difficult for her to recall who had called her ‘daughter’ so lovingly in the past 12 years as she was ostracized and ignored. She was an untouchable, unholy, impure creature to be kept at a distance from everybody who knew her. But here the guru

was addressing her ‘daughter’. What greater love, respect and recognition does she want?

Her fear vanished. Her sense of guilt melted like wax in fire. The words “Take heart” gave her peace. Now she does not have to run away from anybody. As a daughter of God she is worthy now. “Now I can walk keeping my head up. I can enter any place without fear. It is the Lord himself that has approved me and given me the status of his daughter. The Master has given me much more than just physical healing”, the woman thought.

“Your faith has healed you.” This healing does not limit itself to mere physical healing. “Healing”, beyond bodily cure, has a wider meaning of man's total, comprehensive well-being, salvation. It was the primary aim of God for coming to this earth incarnated as Jesus to give man eternal salvation. That is precisely what means by saying partaking in the divine nature. In the address “Daughter”, there is the echo of this truth. It is not a mere embellishment or an empty address just for effect. Her status as a daughter of God is a gift she earned through her faith. Jesus openly says it for the whole world to listen and take note of.

This recognition that she is the daughter of God and she is granted healing from her debilitating disease will give her lasting joy and peace. Now she can go and live her normal life without fearing anyone, without any inferiority complex, without bending her head in shame. She can make progress in her life. She is the daughter of God. She does not have to doubt if she has been called to the front to ridicule or punish her. She was called to the front to give her a present, to commend her and not criticize or condemn her. Her realization that what she did was not a crime but an act of faith must have filled her with joy, contentment and just pride. Who can measure the depth

of her feeling of happiness especially when she was addressed as daughter, telling her to “go in peace”.

This is what happens even today. Diseases that are decreed as incurable by medical science need not be so. The people branded impure by the society need not be so, too. Chronic diseases are not curses from God or the result of the sins of one’s forefathers. Come closer with confidence. Overcome impediments. With faith touch the hem of his cloak. He will give you healing. Today we have the opportunity not merely to touch his cloak but accept him wholly in our hearts. Isn’t that what is happening in the Holy Eucharist? So “Take heart. Your faith has healed you.”

## 23 FAVOUR THAT DRIVES FEAR AWAY



*“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God’*

(Lk 1,30).

Mary is standing at a crucially decisive turn in the history of salvation. God placed her at the juncture where the Old Testament gives place to the New Testament or where the Old Testament gets fulfilled in the New Testament. To prepare the way in the world to receive His Son as its Saviour, God selected and protected Mary as the true symbol and representative of chosen people of God - the Israelites. Not only that, God chose this village girl from Nazareth as the Mother of the Son of God

and also as the Model and Mother of the Church that would be founded by him.

It was the greeting of the angel of the Lord who was sent to inform her of the selection that made her restless and anxious. That was quite natural. The Bible has recorded a number of times how awe-inspiring could be the mere appearance of the Angel of the Lord. The angels are beings that partake in the holiness and glory of God. Their vision reminds one of the presence of God. The experience of Moses hiding his face from the angel appearing in the blazing bush that was not consumed is not an isolated instance (Ex 3,2-6) as he was not the only person with such experiences of angelic appearances. This is the experience of all those who enter into the presence of God (Ex 19,16; Is 6”5; Ez 1,28). But what make Mary puzzled is more the greetings than the presence of the angel.

The English translation “You have found favor with” does not fully represent the full impact and meaning of the original greeting. When it was adapted into the prayer, it became “Hail Mary, full of grace”. Both the phrases in English do not fully depict the echo and import of the original greeting. The Greek original is “*KaireKekarithomene*”. *Kaire* means ‘rejoice’. This is a form of greeting. This is the joy that God gives. It is a very special gift from that should bring bliss to the listener. “God has especially chosen you; He has showered His abundant blessings on you; therefore rejoice.”

The basis of this joy is emphasized by the epithet ‘*kekarithomene*’ and this is related to the word ‘*karis*’ which means grace or favour. The literal meaning of this would be one who is favored or one who has received special grace. This indicates a selection and, at the same time, a mission.

When God chooses someone for a special mission, He also endows him/her with the necessary graces. Grace is the sum

total of all the gifts or blessings by God. Looked at from a different angle, the source of all gifts and blessings is grace. Here it is this grace that causes concern and anxiety to Mary. She must have been worried thinking what kind of a mission she was going to be entrusted with. The Gospelist tells us that Mary was much perplexed by the words of the angel and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Before revealing the details of the mission, the angel reassures her by telling her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God’ (Lk 1,30).

The declaration that ‘you have found favor with God’ does not indicate any action of Mary or the outcome of any such action. This is a peculiar style of Semitic languages. God has showered abundant blessings on you. It is a free gift from God. This awareness releases one from fear. The free selection, the gift and the mission it contains should make Mary rejoice. Fear should be kept at bay.

The explanation that follows stresses the significance of the mission and gives some hints at the risks and sufferings it would entail. She should become the mother of the Savior. She should give her son the name Jesus, which means the Messiah. That son will be the fulfillment of all the prophecies. Even as a Virgin, she will conceive the Son of God; it would be by a special act of the Holy Spirit. All these explanations and details might have given Mary some inkling into the significance of the mission entrusted to her and the troubles, tribulations and suffering she will have to undergo for fulfilling that mission. How tough were the tests, how excruciating were the paths to be trodden by her and how tormenting were their mental afflictions.

Mary was a virgin who was betrothed to a carpenter of Nazareth named Joseph. She is not unaware of the disgrace

and dire predicament awaiting her for conceiving without the knowledge of her betrothed. The Book of Deuteronomy explicitly states what happens in such a situation, “If, however, this charge is true, that evidence of the young woman’s virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father’s house and the men of her town shall stone her to death” (22,20-21). The starting will be such a dire one. Going further will be fraught with horrors and disasters. Heavy with child, close to delivery time, travelling to Bethlehem nearly 130 km away, seeking shelter in a stable and giving birth in a manger, amidst cattle, the prophecy regarding the sword piercing her heart, fleeing to save the life of the infant, life as a refugee, finally at the foot of the cross where her son is crucified, being accused of blasphemy and sacrilege by the politico-religious court. Imagine the predicament in which she had to stand looking helplessly listening to the lament of her dying son, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” All these were not evident at the start; some indications, however, of these events could be seen in the message of the angel. Therefore, the words, “Mary, don’t be afraid” become very relevant.

If we insert our name in the place of Mary in the message, we will be able to understand what this message conveys to us. As in the case of Mary, God gives grace to each one of us, the grace that is necessary to complete our assigned tasks. There, we should not be afraid and the statement “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor 12,9) is relevant not only to St. Paul but also to each one of us. As we are called by him, we will not be abandoned on the way. That God is holding my hand is more important than I am holding God’s hand. Nobody will remove that mighty hand from my hand. But I should never try to shake of His hand, extricate myself and flee from his presence. Therefore, “Do not be afraid; you have found favor with God.”

## 24 EMMAUS



*“They urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight”*

(Lk 24,29-31).

They were desperate; panicky. They were persons who had lost everything. All the dreams they had built up collapsed like a palace made of a pack of cards. All their hopes vamoosed; nay, they were brutally crushed, extinguished. It was their dreams that evaporated in the cross of Golgotha. They had foreseen a

new dawn of complete liberation as they had been languishing under the debilitating yoke of the Romans who have been suppressing them for centuries. The youthful carpenter from Nazareth gave wings to their rosy dreams. There was the strong feeling and expectation that the Kingdom of David was once again near at hand. When the radiant youth entered Jerusalem riding a donkey amidst ear-splitting cries of 'Hosanna', for a brief while they thought he was the Son of David whom the prophets had foretold and for whom they had been waiting for centuries. He did not object to the celebration. He only encouraged them to persist in their assumptions about him. And then?

How swiftly did all the dreams and expectations crumble? He had entered the town like a triumphant king, but after 4 days he was led along the same path through which he came like a despicable criminal with a cross forced on his shoulders. Hanging on the cross in Golgotha, which means a place of skulls, crying 'Oh God!, Oh God! Why have you forsaken me?' When he breathed his last, it marked the end of an era. Along with that did end their hopes and dreams! Even at midday, gloom pervaded. The people who had extinguished the light God had sent them were immersed in darkness. The Disciples of Jesus realized not only that their expectations were coming to an abrupt end, but also their safety was in serious jeopardy.

The ruthless soldiers will now hunt for the followers of the rebel who has been crucified as a blasphemer and a traitor. Where will now the helpless Disciples go? Well, why should they hide after all? The meaning of life was lost, and even the desire to live has dwindled. This is how evangelist Luke depicts the mental state of the two Disciples who decided to leave Jerusalem and go to Emmaus, which is some 11 km (i.e. 60 stadia) away. The faces of the Disciples were mirrors of their

anxious and agonizing minds, as they were walking slowly discussing and arguing about their plight and prospects. It was to them Jesus came as an utter stranger.

Their eyes were so blinded that they could not recognize the stranger they were walking with. Jesus took time to enter their heart. He asked them as if he was ignorant of their current discussions, "What are you talking so seriously about?" The question made their hearts break as they were already brimming with bitter thoughts of their lost glory and crumbled dreams. They shared with him everything; they opened their hearts to him. They talked about their expectations, hopes and aspirations. Then they talked about their desperations, disappointments and their shattered and pulverised dreams. Without knowing why, they related their tale of woes to the stranger. They looked at the events, described and evaluated them from their own perspective. What else, how else could they do? The stranger accompanying them listened to everything patiently. He encouraged them to open their hearts and reveal to him all their contents. When they had finished all, he asked them the million-dollar question.

"Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (Lk24,26). The stranger might have thought like this, "Fools! Their hearts have gone so dull that they can't even believe what the prophets had foretold!" This thought was followed by a simple teaching, a lucid explanation, an appropriate interpretation. The interpretation was capable of extirpating all the roots of pain and despair that were penetrating their minds. All the things that happened to the Nazarene were not accidental or perfunctory. All the things were foretold by God through the Prophets. From the symbol of the serpent smiting the foot of the one crushing its head, there have been symbols and forewarnings galore. It was

the salvific scheme of God that was fulfilled in Jesus. But they must realise that this is not the end of all, but is the beginning of a new age.

When he explained things to them, they could see how the prophecies were getting fulfilled one by one. Their eyes were opened. They received a new sight as well as insight. In the new light they saw everything clearly. In Isaac going up the hill (Gen 22) with the wood of the burnt offering, they could see Jesus climbing Golgotha with the cross. They saw the shadow of Jesus in the Passover Lamb that saved them from the Destroyer in Egypt (Ex 12), in the sacrificial lamb going to the wilderness bearing the entire sin of the people on the day of the Passover Sacrifice to the Lord (Ex 16,7-10) and above all in the Suffering Servant who bore the sin of the whole world on him and gave his life as atonement for the sins of the people (Is 52, 13; 53,12). In the cry of the Psalmist “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22), they heard the echo of the cry coming from the cross. Nothing was accidental, they realized.

Time was ticking away, but they were unaware of it. Suddenly they became aware of the time and terrain. It is getting to be dusk. The horizons are growing gloomy. They saw how the darkness going away from their inner beings was spreading across the universe. They also realized they have reached their destination. They are nearer their abode. What now? It seemed that the stranger was intent on travelling further. Where is he going? If he leaves this village, there is no other one close by for him to rest in the night. Where will this wayfarer go? They did not think much about any other thing. The invitation was from the bottom of their hearts, “Stay with us!”

Biblical scholars can argue back and forth with their hair-

splitting syllogism as to what was the inspiration that prompted them to extend the invitation to the total stranger. Some scholars posit that the solace and joy and the indescribable peace his words gave prompted them to invite him to stay so that they could listen to more of his wise and welcome words. “Master, stay with us!” This is a request; nay, it is a sigh that comes from the core of their being. It is getting dark. There is gloom all around and also inside. So they want him to stay with them as the light removing darkness, as solace driving away pain, and as courage giving them strength and hope. Don’t leave us alone! When you are with us, we are not afraid, we have no pain. When you were walking with us, we had almost forgotten about ourselves and our vexations. Your noble presence must always be with us. Maybe this was the reason why the Disciples wanted the stranger to stay with them. Yes, agreed. But there are more reasons, too.

Where will the stranger go alone in this night? There is no house in the neighbourhood. There is no habitation nearby. Through the dark paths, where will he go and how will he go? What will happen in the darkness? Where will he find a place to rest? Who will give him food? No, we can’t abandon this stranger on the way at night. There is only one thing to do. Accommodate him in your abode. Share your food. Give him a space to rest. Let him go away in the morning if he wishes so. This also could be the reason that prompted the Disciples to extend their invitation to the stranger.

There is no need to choose one of the two options above. It could be both. The more relevant question is why did Luke describe this incident so exquisitely? The most important thing is the import of the message conveyed here. The onward description gives the answer to all such questions. The stranger thankfully accepted the invitation to stay with them. But look

at the behaviour of the stranger. Actually he is the guest, but he behaves like the host. He took bread, blessed it and divided it and gave them to eat. Now the screen that had fallen over their eyes parted. They saw things clearly now. They recognised him. That very moment he vanished (Lk 24,30-31).

It was when Jesus broke the bread, the Disciples recognized their Master. The interpretation of the Word he gave them while they were still on the road led them to the recognition. It was as if they were reading the Word without knowing its meaning. But they understood everything when the bread was broken by him. For that realization the opening of the eye was needed. They were immersed in their own sorrows, shattered dreams, fears and anxieties and naturally they could not understand the import of the Word or recognise their Master. But the moment they recognized him, they knew something else, too, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Lk 24,32).

Let us not take away the importance of this incident as something that happened 2000 years ago to two Disciples who were on their way to Emmaus. God wants everyone to have this Christ-experience today, everyday. In fact the Holy Eucharist is the venue to have such an experience. The early Christians called the Holy Eucharist as ‘Breaking Bread’. The bread was broken after sharing the Word among the gathering. That is why the Apostolic Letter written by the Pope, St. John Paul II, was titled “*Mane NobiscumDomine*” – “Stay with us, Lord”.

He will definitely accept our invitation. Don't doubt. When he walks with us we will know no exhaustion. When he dwells with us, our fears will evaporate. Our hearts will flame. We will realize that life has a meaning and aim. Whatever happened was not accidental. All the things happened with the

knowledge of God and he wanted them. Now only one thing remains. Open your heart for his Word. Pray to him to open your eyes and ears. Invite him into your hearts. The Disciples got Jesus as their guest when they were ready to accept him in their abode. Let us not forget that it was when he broke the bread, they recognized that he was none other than their beloved Master. Through the Holy Eucharist he lives in our midst; he comes to our hearts. We are no more alone. We are no more orphans. Emmaus is the venue where the prayer “Lord, stay with us!” bears fruit. Emmaus means ‘hot spring’. The hot spring will warm the cold hearts. That is the Word, the Holy Eucharist.

## 25 POWER FROM ABOVE



*“I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high”*

(Lk 24,49).

How quickly have the days gone! They could not believe that 40 days have passed since they first met the resurrected Lord. When he walked with them, they did not know how swiftly the hours and days were running away. Their hearts knew no fear and their bodies no tiredness. How beautiful was everything! Look! The Lord once again is planning to leave them. This realization immersed them in fear. The sorrow of

departure was obvious in their eyes. Then, lo and behold! There comes a fresh promise, and along with that, a new suggestion.

The Helper Holy Spirit is often designated as the Promise of the Father. The Holy Spirit will come as power and animation, as light and insight, as solace to wipe away sorrow, as presence instilling courage. But for that they ought to wait. A specialty of Luke’s Gospel is its way of encapsulating time and terrain with microscopic precision. If we read the descriptions in Luke’s Gospel we might be tempted to think that Jesus ascended to heaven the very day he resurrected. But as per the descriptions in the Acts of the Apostles, after resurrection Jesus spent 40 days on earth meeting the Apostles at various venues and giving them necessary teachings and instructions before his Ascension (Acts 1,3). One of the instructions was that they should stay in Jerusalem.

However their stay in Jerusalem had a limit and also an important objective, that is to wait there for the promise of the Father of which he had spoken to them (Acts 1,3-4). Jerusalem was not a place for their permanent stay. It was a place of waiting and meeting. In the presentation of the Gospels, Jerusalem was the destination of Jesus’ journey. But in the Acts of the Apostles, Jerusalem is the starting point. Taking off from there, the Apostles must pass through Judea and Samaria and reach the ends of the earth. Jesus is not sending them to a world eagerly awaiting the Gospel and keen to accept it. The reception they get might even be worse than what their Master got. They may have to face opposition and mockery, torture and torments and then, may be, ultimately death.

While presenting before them a plan for global evangelization, Jesus makes it clear what would be their source and tower of strength. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in

Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1,8). The Apostles have plenty of anxieties of their own. Their dreams for the future were not in conformity with those of Jesus. Their fear and sense of loss have not yet left them completely. They had a feeling that the reestablishment of the Kingdom of Israel would be near at hand. They had seen the relics of the Empire of David on their way from Galilee to Jerusalem. These had given wing to their dreams of power and positions they might get in the new dispensation. It was then the warning and suggestion from the Master came as a shattering bolt from the blue.

There is no need to go looking for the time and period which have been determined by the Father. Let the secrets remain secrets. The Apostles have to do only one thing. Become witnesses to Jesus. Make those testimonies reach the ends of the earth. Whether the world receives or rejects, be witnesses to Jesus. That is the only mission that the Apostles are entrusted with. How can these illiterate villagers from Galilee, who can boast of no high birth, political power, financial muzzle or any such things carry out this difficult, risky mission? The answer to this question which was disturbing their minds is “The Power from Above”. In their evangelization mission the Apostles are not guided or assisted by any physical arrangements or power sources. It is quite doubtful if they grasped the full import of what they heard from their Master. But they did one thing. As instructed by their Master, they immersed themselves in prayers and waited patiently – without knowing how long the wait would last. The Mother of the Master was with them, as their helper, as their inspiration. “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers” (Acts 1,14).

Then it happened! So suddenly! “And suddenly from

heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2,2-4). Soon they realized what the promise of the Father was. Here what they heard was not the soft voice that Elijah heard as he was hiding in the cave in Horeb. Here it was the roar of the storm that pulverizes all the obstacles before it and moves forward majestically. The house where they had assembled was shaken. Their hearts were filled with flames that melted and cleansed all stains. The Power from Above which came as Divided Tongues untied their tongues and melted the glacier of fear that had frozen their hearts. In a moment they became new creations.

No change in the exterior circumstances. The change was in their inner being. It was the work of the Holy Spirit. They came to know from their inside what the Power from Above meant. They are no more slaves of fear. They will no longer be tormented by doubts and vacillations. They do not have empty day dreams and hollow hopes. They have swallowed the fire of the Spirit and they can't keep their mouths shut any more. They are not reluctant to proclaim the truth they have seen and experienced at the top of their voice from the top of towers. The joy that filled their hearts came out as hymns of praises. The fisherman who out of fear had denied his Master three times before a servant girl was now able to stand erect and preach the Word of God before thousands, “The one who you crucified has been raised by God. We are witnesses to it”.

Those who heard him were petrified with wonder. From where did they get this courage? Who taught them such oratorical skills to say things so impressively? Who gave them such mellifluous language? The words of the Apostles touched

the hearts of the listeners; nay, they lacerated them. They realized the intensity of their guilt. Their hearts throbbed and wept with repentance. Where will they get forgiveness? They enquire. Peter knows who led them to this transformation. He knows it is not him but the Power from Above the Master had promised. Peter told them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2,38-39).

The Holy Spirit who descended on the Apostles on the Day of the Pentecost guided them, fortified them. Evangelization is going on even today to the ends of the earth. The followers of Jesus continue to witness the Gospel without caring for obstacles, without retreating because of threats, even ready to give up their lives if needed. It is the Power from Above that guides them and inspires them. But in due course some disciples of Jesus showed an unhealthy tendency of relying on worldly powers and not on the Power from Above. This happened especially after Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of Rome and gave a lot of privileges and positions to the clergy.

When people yielded to material temptations, the Power from Above was felt to be less important and less necessary. The result of this degeneration is there for all of us to see. There was a terrible loss of faith. First faith became weak. The rituals continued for some more time. Slowly they lost their spiritual import. Many countries which were hundred percent Christian have only a few believers now! Values that were not in conformity with the teachings of Jesus began to penetrate Christendom. When wealth, authority and position became the objectives, people forgot that the driving force behind them was not the Power from Above but the power from Below, the power of the devil.

What were the consequences? Many beautiful churches became empty relics of past glory and grandeur. Many were turned to be supermarkets and entertainment houses. The commandments of God were thrown to the high winds, and a new culture conquered the world. The consumer culture! Here everything is bar coded and price tagged. Mammon’s culture thrives. People want to construct huge churches to show off their wealth, organize mile-long processions and colorful feasts, they would make the entire locality tremble with ear-splitting fireworks and at the end of the feast day organize mimic parades and musical extravaganzas. Even the authorities that succumb to the pressures are also to blame for such glittery, glamorous and glitzy shows which, in fact, hide the source of their real strength – Power from Above.

What Jesus promised was Power from Above, from the Most High. It is a Power that leads people to the renewal of their life and brings about ameliorative changes in the society through the transformation of the heart. Jesus does not give the spirit of hollow emptiness of the inner being which exhibits its lack of real substance through exhibitions of lavish luxury. To get the Power he gives we should return to the Table where he instituted the Last Supper. We should immerse ourselves in prayer with the Mother of Jesus and the Apostles as they did on the day of the Pentecost. We should wait patiently. This is applicable to individuals and societies. Isn’t the Church presently in the predicament of a lamb being surrounded and attacked by a pack of bloodthirsty wolves? Only the Power from Above can take us out of this dire predicament. Only the Holy Spirit, the Promise of the Father, can strengthen the Church to proclaim the Word faithfully and efficiently. God will keep his word. No doubt about it. We should only obey faithfully. Let’s pray that individuals and Church communities are blessed with such a grace by the Most High.

## 26 LET NOT YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED



*“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me”*

(Jn 14,1).

For quite a few days, they had been noting some significant changes in the style of working and also in the speech of Jesus. When the Jewish leaders failed to murder Jesus many times, the Sanhedrin held a meeting and condemned him to death. Jesus had left Jerusalem that day. In a sense, one can say, he was hiding or had gone underground. The Jewish leaders had

put a price to his head (Jn 11,57). But suddenly the Teacher appeared back in Jerusalem. It was a royal entry which no one had anticipated. It was an entry reminding them of many prophecies – riding a donkey. The Guru had taken the initiative for such an entry. When the people shouted “Hosanna”, some of the Pharisees in the crowd asked Jesus to stop them from shouting. But Jesus told the Pharisees that if he told the people to stop, the stones would shout out (Lk 19,40).

The previous night of his triumphant entry to the city of Jerusalem, the anointment with nard at Bethany and the interpretation the Teacher gave had stunned them. ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial’ (Jn 12,7). The disciples had criticised the pouring of the entire contents of the bottle of nard considering such an action as an unnecessary luxury and waste. Jesus rebuked the disciples for their unjust criticism. How come? Why is that? Everybody is thinking of the kingship and the impending liberation. How can then the Teacher talk about burial? They could not make the head and tail of this apparent paradox.

Neither could they grasp the meaning of the tears the Teacher shed when the throng sang Hosanna and waved olive branches (Lk 19,41-44). The Teacher, who entered the city, straightaway went to the Temple. And what did he do there? Did he behave in a most violent manner? Was it not violence when he was swirling and whirling the whip, upsetting tables, shooing away the animals there, releasing the caged birds, scattering the coins around and screaming at the traders? They thought it was a desperate move on his part.

In the subsequent days, in the arguments and counter arguments the Teacher was having with the Pharisees, his voice got rough and his words became sharp. There was the echo of judgment in it. The enmity of the Pharisees reached its peak.

The disciples felt that any time the Pharisees might annihilate their Teacher. This was also the time of the Passover. They felt that this might be the very last Passover for them with their Guru. If anybody had any doubt about it, the words of the Teacher were capable of removing it. “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Lk 22,15).

Although the Teacher had given indications about his impending death during the journey from Galilee, they did not take it seriously. In fact they had not understood it. But this night it was quite different. They did not understand the import of their Teacher kneeling before them like a slave and washing their feet. The words that followed confounded and unnerved them. “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me” (Jn 13,21). Although he did not specify the name, he gave a slight indication as to who it would be. After receiving the bread, the disciple who had the common purse went out – into the dark (Jn 13,26-30). When the Teacher said that not only Judas Iscariot but the entire group of his Disciples would deny him, even the leader of the group, Peter, denying him not just once but thrice that very night, it would indeed be a wonder if no tremor passed through their veins and nerves. It is at this juncture the assuring, assuaging words of the Teacher were heard, “Do not let your hearts be troubled” (Jn 14,1).

The Teacher knows the worries and anxieties of his disciples. It has been not yet three years since they had been called out of their workplaces. They have not yet grasped even a part of what he had been trying to teach them. As they were competitors and aspirants for the high places that would be available when the Messiah, Son of David, would be establishing his Kingdom (Mk 9,33-37; 10,35-37), the impending Passion and Death were simply a riddle. In spite of repeating it a number of times they could not grasp the inevitability of the cross. But the

Teacher knows that soon he will be abandoned by them as fear would hunt them. He has to remove their fear and strengthen them so that they can stand firm. That is why he gives them a long counsel.

Often dubbed as a Farewell Speech, the same theme is repeated many times in different ways in chapters 14-16 in the Gospel of John. The first suggestion Jesus gives for the hearts not to be troubled is faith. “Believe in God, believe also in me” (Jn 14,1). There are three significant questions regarding faith, Whom to believe? What to believe? Why to believe? For all these questions the Teacher gives the answers.

The Teacher does say ‘Believe in me’. Believing a person means mainly acknowledging what he says is true. But here that alone does not suffice. The exhortation to believe which John presents in the Greek language has a specialty. The translation is “In God – in me”. Here also the meaning is not cent percent clear. The translated preposition ‘in’ in English represents two different prepositions in Greek. One is ‘en’ which indicates a static situation, like water in a glass or rice in a pot. If this were the preposition used, the meaning would be “Have your faith in me”. But John here uses the preposition ‘eis’. This preposition is dynamic. Literally it means ‘into’.

Linguistic conventions do not allow the translation to be “Believe into God”. But truly speaking that is the literal meaning. Believing is not something that you do once and then remaining static, inactive or passive but something that you go on doing – dynamic and active. This usage means dedicating oneself to God, relying on God and placing oneself in the hands of God. These give appropriate answers to the questions whom to believe and why to believe. Believe in God and in Jesus is not enough. The lives of the followers should be placed in the hands of God with unconditional faith. For that,

one has to believe in Jesus also. This is what the Disciples did when they followed Jesus after abandoning their boat and nets. That attitude should be always maintained. They should stand firm in their decision.

Jesus further explains what should be believed. “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. ... And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (Jn 14,2-3). Here also many questions may come up. What or where is the Father’s house? What are dwelling places? How is Jesus going to prepare a place? When will he come again? Questions like these!

The Father’s house does not mean any physical thing or any block of buildings. It is the heart of the Father. It is the Father himself. In the Biblical language we can say that it is the Paradise man forfeited because of his sin. (Gen 2,3). This shows the strong, permanent and inseparable relation with God. Dwelling place is the unity with God that is re-established for each person. “Prepare a place” means opening the way to the Father, re-establishing the relations with him, raising men to the status of the children of God and things like that. Jesus is going to prepare a place means he is going to the presence of the Father to re-establish the God-Man relation that was lost. This happens perhaps through the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. This is what is called the glorification of Jesus. That is why Jesus talks about his going away.

In the presentation of John, the Crucifixion of Jesus itself is the glorification. Being raised on the cross is a symbol and an indication of entering into the presence of the Father. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die” (Jn 12,32-33). “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in

the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” Jn 3,13-14). This glorification is the assurance given to the Disciples. The Resurrected Jesus opens the way to the presence of the Father, into his heart, for all those who believe and follow him.

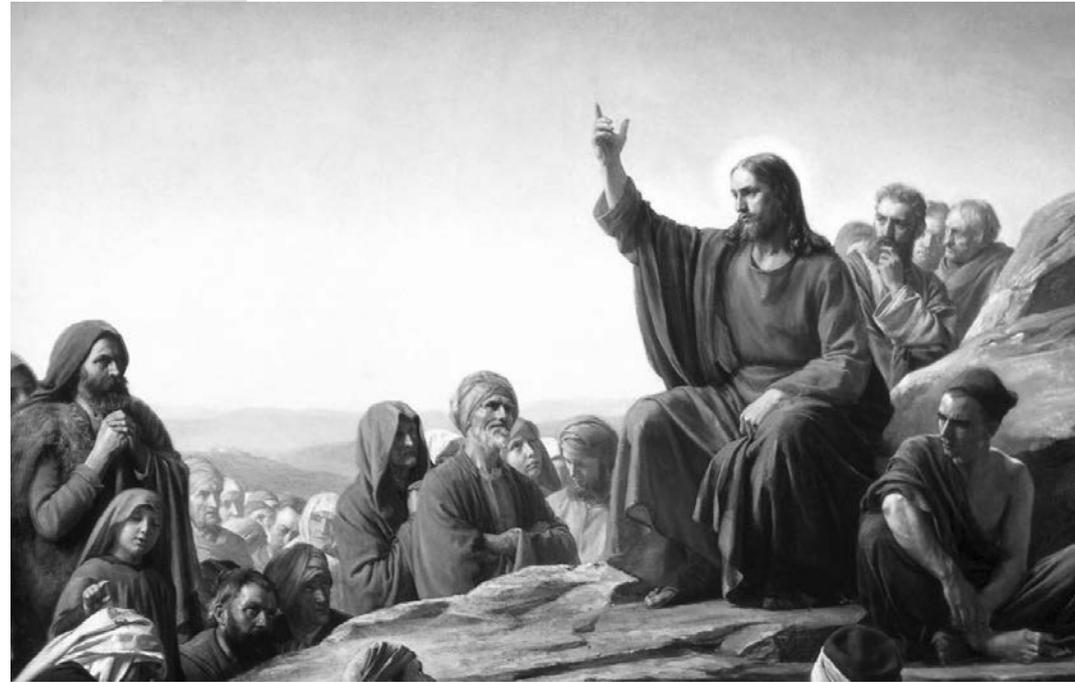
This is the promise of assurance. Although Jesus may become physically invisible through death, he is not distancing himself from the Disciples. But he will be with them in a new and stronger way. Therefore the suffering and even death they might face should not weaken their hearts. Place the life in the hands of the Father through the hands of Jesus. Then the life will be safe for all eternity. Even death is not something to be worried about. Death is not a flight to any emptiness, hollowness. On the contrary it is an entry into the heart of the Father. It is the beginning of dwelling in the heart of the Father permanently. Why should one be afraid to go to the house of the Father?

Also believe the promises of Jesus that he would take with him his followers when he has prepared the dwelling place for them. The life on this earth is not eternal. It is just a passing parade. It is the waiting for the coming of the Lord for being taken away by him. It is not an idle and passive waiting. It is a walk on the way he showed, according to his words, loving like him. That is Christian life. So the disciples need not be worried; they need not be restless. There should be no feeling of boredom and indolence in the waiting. Till the Lord comes, we must wait patiently, expectantly. Remember that the disciple is not alone; the Teacher has given the assurance of that (Jn 14,16-18).

When is he going to return? This coming back can be seen in two ways. One is the second glorious return when the salvific saga reaches its climax. That can be called the end of

Age. But that is not the only one return. Each person's end of life should be seen as a return of Jesus. For a Christian death is the coming of the Lord to take him to the Father. Death is the entry into the prepared dwelling place, after the period of preparation. The disciples are expectantly waiting precisely for that.

## 27 THE ADVOCATE



*“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever”*

(Jn 14,16).

One of the biggest problems, the modern man faces is loneliness. The very observation of the Creator – “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Gen 2,18) – shows how intolerable, unbearable, the state loneliness is. God created man and woman in his own form and image and in the first pages of the Bible we see that man is the social creature that bears the face of God (Gen 1,26-27). God is a Unity of three persons. The basis of

all the revelations is the revealed truth of the oneness in the Trinity, the One Triune God. This is also the nature of man. It is man's character to know and love one another and share things among them. Humanity is a fellowship of mankind.

But often this basic nature of man is in jeopardy. We see the first severe blows to this fellowship when Adam accuses his wife of falling into the deceit of Satan by eating the forbidden fruit and when Cain ruthlessly murders his brother Abel. We see how fear and loneliness fill their hearts. Cain laments, "I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me" (Gen 4,14). From this lament comes the pathetic picture of a man spending his day in the dreadful dungeon of loneliness.

The history of loneliness is as old as the history of man. Man has been looking for ways to overcome loneliness. In the case of the media, both print and electronic, we have proceeded far ahead of our past generations. The world is at our fingertips because of the seemingly infinite reach of technology. Physical distance is no more a problem. People thousands of kilometres away can be seen on our mobile, and we can talk to them. The infinite horizon of contacts has been widely opened up before us.

In spite of all this progress in science and technology and the possibilities of contacts, today man faces greater hollowness, emptiness, loneliness in the depths of his heart. It is shocking to the core. Even when men talk through the mobile and the internet for hours, their hearts are miles apart. Without even knowing who is at the other end of the line, conversations lead into some kind of friendships. Relations are built up. Desires are tickled. By the time the truth gets known, everything is irretrievably lost! And then for many disillusioned ones only one way is open – suicide.

Relations from far may look attractive but they do not give real, permanent relationships, peace or joy. They don't even prove to be solutions to one's loneliness. Does that mean people who are close-by can prove beneficial for those experiencing loneliness? There are situations where no one can help; there are problems so complex that they defy anyone's understanding; there are private sorrows that can't be shared with others. In one sense, don't all of us experience some such loneliness? There might be variations in the intensity of the loneliness. But there is some kind of loneliness in everybody. Man tries to get out of this mire in many ways. The ways might include entertainments of various sorts or intimate relations or they could be hard work. Whatever might they be, some loneliness is bound to remain. What is the remedy for this?

This loneliness, and the remedy the Lord suggests, was the theme of the Words of Farewell during the Last Supper. The Master knows that it is not mere loneliness that the Disciples face. The horrendous drama that is going to unfold before them in a matter of hours will be seen as a great disaster by them. They will not only be aware of their loss, but they will recognize that their lives too are in jeopardy. When the Lord speaks to them, addressing them as Little Children, he is letting them know that he has realized the anxieties and fears burdening their hearts. He had told them many times that only those who were willing to take up the cross should accompany him. But the realization that the things they feared were going to happen soon they were stricken by fear and were trembling and the Lord's words were intended to fortify them with courage and strength.

Their Master is going to leave them; nay, he is going to be snatched away from their midst by foul murderers. The main reason for their fear is the realization that they will be now left

alone. Who will be their helper? Whom will they approach for succour? They had asked this question once, earlier. The day after he had multiplied the loaves and made the people contented he spoke to the crowd who had come to hear him. But all of them, even some followers, left at the end of the talk without being convinced of the essence of his talk. Their stance was that they were not cannibals to accept his teaching! It was in this context Jesus asked his Apostles if they too wished to go away from him. The response to this query came from Peter, representing all the Apostles, “Lord, to whom can we go?” (Jn 6,68).

No, they haven’t a place to go to. As they had followed the Master, they have nowhere else to go. What when the Master goes away? Jesus responds to that query. He would not abandon his Apostles halfway, in the middle of nowhere, after making them follow him thus far. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever” (Jn 14,16). They don’t have to go anywhere seeking succour. The Spirit of God will come to them as their Helper. Jesus will pray and the Father will send them the Helper. Jesus stressed the fact that only when he went away, the Helper would come (16,7). Jesus had indicated this even earlier. “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water..... for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (Jn 7,37-39).

The one sent by the Father in response to the prayer of Jesus is called the Advocate or Helper. The Greek word which is translated as Advocate or Helper is ‘*parakletos*’. The noun *parakletos* comes from the verbal form ‘*parakalein*’. *Parakalein* literally means to be called to be near or close by. The Latin word ‘*Advocatus*’ means the same from which we get the English

word ‘Advocate’. It means one is called near to give help or one is standing close-by ready to help. The Apostles don’t have to fear. They don’t have to be lonely. The very Spirit of God will be there to help them. It is not the presence of a rare guest who comes just once in a blue moon. The Spirit of God will dwell with them always.

Jesus very clearly tells them what the Spirit of God who dwells with them will do. He will be always with them. “He abides with you, and he will be in you” (Jn 14,17). It is not mere presence somewhere near. It is the internal presence. He dwells in us. He guides us from inside; he motivates, consoles, fortifies. It is an eternal internal presence. The Advocate or Helper the Father sends in response to the prayer of the Son will be the source of strength.

“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (Jn 14,26). Although Jesus went with them for quite some time and told them many things and taught them many things, they did not quite understand many of the things he had said. Therefore they needed some further training. Only gradually can the disciples enter the depths of the Christ-mysteries. It is a process that might take centuries. This teaching process which was begun with the Apostles will continue in the Church which is built on their heritage. Till the end of age. The training will help us to understand better what Jesus has taught; what is forgotten will be reminded. More than that, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth;.... and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (Jn 16,13-14). What the Holy Spirit will do is continuing the work begun by Jesus.

Three things are stressed. “When he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement”

(16,8). The sin is rejecting Jesus. It is the Holy Spirit that gives the understanding that Jesus is the real Son of God and he is the Saviour and rejecting Him is tantamount to rejecting God. This is the awareness of sin. Man has got salvation through the death, resurrections and entry of Jesus into the presence of the Father. The Spirit will give the awareness that by rejecting Jesus the world is bringing judgment on itself. All these triple convictions, three-fold forms of awareness, are the help given by the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the life of the disciples the presence of the Helper will be there. The Holy Spirit, who makes us children of God, will help us to live according to the will of God and pray (Rom 8,14-17, 26). In our suffering he will give solace; he will give us courage to bear testimony to Jesus and the words with which to proclaim it (Mt 10,20). Right from the first Pentecost until now, the followers of Christ have been experiencing this truth. The Holy Spirit descended with the roar of a mighty storm and entered the Apostles like tongues of flaming fire. This Spirit is always there as an Advocate for us. He leads the way, strengthens us and dwells in us. This 'another Advocate' is the one who continues to give the help and inspiration and all the other good things Jesus has been giving. The efforts by some outfits who try to establish that the Helper who came after Jesus was another human being are absurd, devoid of any truth.

If the same animation, the same power and the same Spirit that dwelt in Jesus dwells in me whom should I fear? Now there is no reason for us to worry about loneliness. Don't say there is nobody to help me, nobody to understand me and such things. Open your inner eyes. The Helper you seek, the Friend you are looking for, is not anywhere far, but right in your heart. So enter the inner sanctuary. Enter the presence of

the Spirit that dwells in you. Then all the fears and anxieties will vamoose like mist before the sun. Your heart will be filled with contentment, peace and joy. "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (Jn 15,11).

## 28 DYING IS GAIN



*“One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you’”*

(Acts 18,9-10).

The change that came over the youth was incredible. He was born in the university town of Tarsus as a Roman citizen. He gained deep knowledge in Greek philosophy and literature. That Jewish youth reached Jerusalem to pursue higher studies in the faith of his people and theology. He studied under the then most renowned guru Gamaliel. Greek thoughts and studies of the Jewish religion made Saul an extremist. Saul became a fanatic and a terrorist.

He was ready to give up everything for the faith he conceived to be the truth. He belonged to the Pharisees who were notorious for their extremist thinking. He was not unwilling to go to any extent and make any sacrifice for his religion. He was ready to resist or kill anybody or die for defending his faith and his religious convictions. He was a young fundamentalist who had all the makings of a religious terrorist. Saul thought that the young carpenter from Nazareth – Jesus – was the biggest threat that Jewish religion was facing. Jesus was found guilty by the Jewish authorities; he was tried and sentenced to death by the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews, and he was handed over to the Romans to execute the death sentence.

Saul realized that the followers of the Nazarene, who was sentenced to death for his blasphemy, were a grave threat not only for the unity of the Jews, but even for the very existence of that ancient religion. Traditional Jews and the fresh converts who had been Gentiles before were equally becoming followers of this Nazarene. Not only in Jerusalem, but even outside Palestine, the followers of this man called Jesus were causing dissensions, splits and divisions among the Jewish communities. Saul was determined to obliterate this dangerous schism by nipping it in the bud and he tried very hard for it.

The result was immediate. Saul was the one who took the initiative to stone Stephen to death by stoning. Stephen was invincible in arguments and debates as he had deep knowledge and wisdom and immense oratorical skills. Saul felt that he was moving in the right direction. Close to the city gate, thunder roared from the blue sky! Before he knew what had happened, Saul fell down to the ground. Blinded by the stunning lightning, he could not see anything. What was that light that fell in his eyes for a brief moment? He could

not believe his ears. Somebody is calling him by his name, **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9,4)**. Who is it? What is it? An individual or some mysterious power? An angel or a devil? Who are you? The reply came fast and quick, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (9,5).

Now Saul not only lost his eyesight, but he felt that ground under his feet was splitting. It seemed as if he was hurtling headlong into a bottomless pit. He felt his world turning upside down, topsy-turvy. Whatever he had believed so far, for which he was ready to kill or die, was a lie. He suddenly recognizes that he was so far under some dangerous delusion and he was a victim to terrible hoodwinking hallucination and deceit. Didn't that carpenter from Nazareth, Jesus, who was accused of blasphemy and being a false prophet, and was hanged on the cross, die? How come that he is standing here at the gate of Damascus like a lightning with the power of a thousand suns? How is that he is telling me that I am persecuting him? It seems he is living in each Christian I persecuted, tormented and killed. It was a revelation that Saul could not comprehend by the mind trained in the Jewish strict monotheism

It made him really blind. One life ended at the gate of Damascus. Saul suddenly realized that whatever he had considered as truth was falsehood, all his gains were losses and all that he did considering virtuous were gross iniquities. In a moment he lost everything he had studiously and meticulously built up all his life. He felt utterly hollow, empty. Here is a fresh start. Here is the birth of Apostle Paul from the Jewish extremist Saul. The blindness he experienced in the following three days was the indication and symbol of this complete transformation.

When Ananias laid his hand on the head of Saul and prayed, from Saul's eyes fell off the scales of religious fanaticism

which had afflicted his eyes like blinding cataract. Now he will see everything in a new light. He will accept things with a new perspective. From now on he will have no enmity with anyone. He will not nurture any anger or hatred for any one. He can't kill anybody any more; he can't even pain anybody with a pinch. All those were the peculiarities of the past wanton life. Now he has only one desire, only one aim. He should know Jesus; he should share in his suffering; he should recognize the power of his resurrection; he wants to be united with him. He wants to proclaim to the whole world the Jesus he met and knew about. All those who were ignorant and blind like him should know about Jesus. He will live now to fulfil that aim.

This incident which influenced not only Saul, but the entire Church and the world took place in AD 36. The three decades that followed saw the missionary work of the greatest evangelist. How many travels! His life was constantly guided by the Holy Spirit as he carried Christ in his mind, heart and soul. His movements were like one with fire in his head and wings on his feet. He was ready to suffer anything. Death did not matter at all. He never got despaired of rejections, never was afraid of oppositions, and was never bothered with threats. He always followed the ways shown and guided by the Spirit.

His life became fruitful and triumphant. More than anybody else he knew Jesus and proclaimed Jesus. His love for Jesus set him on fire which blazed till was extinguished in Rome. On the Via Appia, near the city wall, there is a place called *Trefontaine*. The word means three fountains. Legend has it that when Paul was beheaded here his head bounced twice and in each of the three places where his head fell a spring or stream appeared.

Let us listen to the testimony of Paul in his own words: I suffered “far more imprisonments, with countless floggings,

and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters” (Acts 23,26). The list of his sufferings goes on and on. These are not complaints or resentments. He presents them as his certificates of merits and citations of achievements.

Jesus who met Saul at the gate of Damascus made him Paul. He gave Paul a new vision of life and some definite aim. He dwelt in him as a strong presence. Paul realized that he had no more a life of his own. He proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues of the Jews. When he was rejected there he would rush to the Gentiles. To all these people, whether Jews or Gentiles, Paul had only one thing to say: Jesus is the only Lord. In him alone is salvation. Now there is no difference between Jew and Gentile. All of them are one in Jesus. They have become members of his body. He is the head. We are members. If a member has home pain, the head feels it.

The presence of Jesus which was above time and terrain guided Paul constantly. Through visions and counsels Paul was shown the way forward. Through miracles and signs he confirmed the testimonies of Paul. Paul’s life became one with that of Jesus. “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2,20). There is no place for fear in that life. There is no selfishness. That life was dedicated to proclaim Jesus, from Jerusalem to Illyricum, nay, to Rome and beyond, to the ends of earth.

The first city in Europe where Paul preached and founded the Church was Philippi. It is in the Letter he wrote to the Philippians that the Apostle opens his heart with a lot of love and surging emotions. He wrote this letter when he was incarcerated in prison. The Apostles thinks that maybe today is his last day as tomorrow he may be killed. We can see how the Apostle opens his heart, while in prison, in this letter, “It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, *living is Christ and dying is gain*....my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Philippi 1,20-23).

From the moment Paul realized who Jesus was, this has been his attitude. This is the same attitude each person who has known Christ closely has. He is afraid of nothing. Death is a gain. Death is the door that opens to the home of eternal life. Going through that door you straightaway enter Jesus and your permanent home, the heart of the Father. This prompts the Apostles to be witnesses to Jesus. It should prompt us too. The one who called you is faithful. The one who died and was raised is with you everywhere, every time. So, don’t fear. Let us continue our proclamation of the Gospel through words, deeds and above all, through our lives.

## 29 LOVE IS THE ANSWER



*“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear”*

(1 Jn 4, 18).

He was filled with fear. Guilt feeling consumed his heart. The Master had warned him but it happened. Not once but three times, and that also not in front of Magistrate who could condemn him to death or during an official trial. Just in front of a woman who was guarding the door. Three times I swore that I do not know Him. I became conscious of what I was

doing only when the Lord looked at me. Like a lightning His warnings struck me. That day started this river of tears. I feel that my skull has become a lake and my eyes two springs. Could these tears wash the stain of my sins? My failures and infidelity continued.

I ran away at the decisive moment and rejected Him when I was questioned. Disregarding all that, the Master accepted me. The resurrected Lord allowed me to see him. Showered His Spirit upon me and empowered me and appointed me as the head of the Apostles. After all these, I went back to my old job with the other disciples. I picked up the boat and net that were discarded upon hearing the call of the Lord. It was the Master who appointed us in the place of the 12 heads of 12 tribes and gave us the name “Apostles”. He made us responsible for spreading the Gospel and gave us power to forgive sins. Of the twelve, the Master had given special care to three of us, the sons of Zebedee, James and John and then me. The Master love me, trusted me and gave me the leadership of the Apostles.

However, I took the initiative to lead the Apostles astray. We worked all night and combed the entire lake but got nothing. In the morning, the seven of us reached ashore with empty stomach and sleepy eyes. We do not know what happened to the other four. It was I who shattered the Master’s dream and led the group astray. The one who betrayed him ended his life but did not lead anyone astray but I did it. The Master called me “Rock” and expected me to be the corner stone of the Church but what did I do? I shook the very foundation of that Church.

What did I get for going back into the old job? Zero! Total failure! It was then we heard a sound from the shore. We could not see the figure clearly as it was foggy. But, a directive came to cast the net on the right. The impossible

became possible! The net full of fish! I still was not clear who it was but John said that it was the Master. I could not wait any longer. I put on my outer garment and jumped into the sea. I swam ashore and when I reached there I saw the Master who was waiting for us with baked bread and fried fish. Like a mother, He was waiting for us. How can I look at his face?

I felt like the earth I was standing would collapse – was it a feeling or a wish? He loved me above the others and made me the leader of the gang. I almost wished if the earth would swallow me. I swore that I did not know Him. I neglected all the warnings the Master gave me. It was love that prompted me to dissuade him from following the path of the cross. Or was I scared that I would have to walk the same path. Then the Lord called me Satan. “But he turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men” (Mt 16, 23). It was shortly after He told me that I was blessed for receiving the revelation from the Father; I was called the Rock on which He would build his Church. Then I did not understand anything.

At the Last Supper I promised that I would not deny Him even if others do. Was it a boasting? When he said to sell our outer garment and buy swords, as a fool, I offered that we had two swords at hand. Then I did not understand that we need humility and prayer to withstand the attack of the Satan, not iron swords. Finally when the soldiers arrested him, I used the sword and that was another act of foolishness. I do not know if it was due to lack of practice or sleep, I aimed at the neck but it only sliced the ears.

Peter saw the past in front of him as if on a movie screen. About three and a half years ago, he was looking at his empty net, totally disappointed. A stranger walked into his boat and filled it with fish and then invited him to follow him. He left

everything and followed him. The years filled with miracles, teaching, oppositions and rejections. The disciples also got scared and ran away. Now in this early morning, the Master is waiting with Breakfast. How can he look at the face of the Master? What will He ask? What will he answer? Peter was in the grip of guilt feeling and disappointment. He stood there with shivering feet and frightened heart. He was called Rock but he melted like wax. The poor fisherman, son of Jonah!

It was fear that made Peter weak and a coward. He had walked into the raging sea, hearing the call of the Master. At first he did not even think that he was walking on the rising waves. But, for a moment he took his eyes off the Master and he began to sink. The next moment he began to sink but was saved by the extended hand of the Master.

It was fear that made him to cry out, “Lord save me” (Mt 14,30). It was fear that forced him to dissuade the Master from the path of the Cross. It was fear that made him swear that he did not know the Master. He felt like crying out loud saying that he was only a frightened coward. How could Peter stand in front of the Lord.

But, none of that Peter feared happened. The one who waited with breakfast made them eat to their fill. There was no accusation, scolding, reprimand or disappointment. Only an outpouring of love! After feeding them like a mother, the decisive question came but not the way he imagined and feared. Calling him Simon, Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. He called the old name because Jesus was aware of all his failures and weaknesses. He walked into Peter’s life in the same way he had done three years ago.

There was a hook to that question, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” (Jn 21, 15). Peter had boasted, “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never

fall away” (Mt 26, 33). Jesus repeated the question two more times. When the Lord asked a third time, Peter could not bear it. Filled with repentance and sorrow, he burst out in tears and said, “Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” (Jn 21, 17).

Two different Greek words are used to present the question of Jesus and the response of Peter. Jesus used the Greek word “*Agapao*”. This is the highest form of love. It is a love that is given without looking at the merit of the recipient. Neither does it come from a natural inclination. It is a love that is offered to another aiming only at the good of the other, without expecting anything in return. It is the result of a firm decision. It is a decision to love, no matter what the other did. The attitude is, “Even if you hate me and reject me, I would continue to love you”. This is the kind of love God extends to man. The first two times this was the word Jesus used with Peter.

In answering to Jesus, Peter was used the Greek word, “*Philein*”. This refers to natural human love. It is a kind of love that is shared by friends. In other words it can be compared to liking. There is a little selfishness hidden in it as it presupposes certain conditions. It also hints to a mutual love. At the moment Peter was not able to go beyond that level.

There are two more Greek words use to denote love. One is “*Stergo*” or affection that refers to the kind of feelings parents have for the children. The other word is “*Eros*” from which the words, eros and erotic come. This could be defined as sexual love, the kind of love shared by husband and wife. These two words were not used in the Bible.

The second time Peter used the *Philein* to express his love for Jesus, Jesus changed the word and used the same word,

“*Philein*” as Peter used. That is when Peter broke down and proclaimed. “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you”.

This was a new beginning. It was not started by accusation, punishment or threatening. It started with unconditional love and that wiped away Simon’s fear and made him Peter again. By loving Jesus made Peter capable of loving all. It eliminated his fear and gave him courage. Here after, Peter would not fear, would not boast, comparing himself with others. No more he would feel jealous or disappointment.

The unconditional love of Jesus became a balm that healed the wound of Peter. It gave him courage at the face of fear. He was convinced that the love of Jesus would never leave him. That love was not affected by betrayal, denial, running away, or wounding. Peter recognized the depth of that love and that awareness became a spring of love that would nourish the dry hearts.

No more Peter was scared. Even when others bound him and led him to the places he would rather not go, he did not protest. That morning on the bank of Tiberius, Jesus poured unconditional love into Peter. It became a life giving spring in the heart of Peter and He guided many to Jesus. After Thirty-five years, in Rome, on the Vatican hill, he was crucified upside down but he was not afraid. Filled with love and gratitude, he expressed satisfaction for dying for the Master.

Love is the remedy for fear at all times. The mother who jumps into the well to save her child does not think of fear. Love does not know fear. In the same way where there is fear, there is no love. Love of Jesus made Simon Peter and the same love is extended to us. May He give us the grace to live in love without fear!

## 30 WHOM TO FEAR



*“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him!”*

(Lk 12, 4-5).

Throughout the Bible we see the command, “Fear not”. But Jesus has said to fear certain things and some are surprised at such an exhortation. Why the same person tells us not to fear and also to fear? Is this not a contradiction? There is certain question about whom we are to fear. Hence, we must examine closely and see whom we are to fear.

The above verse was uttered while Jesus was talking about dangers and threats when they set out for evangelization. The human enemies could hurt us physically. It is a reality, Jesus and his disciples had experienced it already. The followers of Jesus will be subjected to severe persecution and cruel death but there is no need to fear them as that is not the end. It is only the beginning of the eternal life with God. Rejoice when you are called to suffer in the name of the Gospel because they would receive great reward in heaven. Hence, no need to fear the physical tortures.

Beyond death there is a judgment and then one would receive eternal life as a reward or eternal damnation as a punishment. Beware of the one who can push you into hell after killing you physically. Jesus tells us to be afraid of him but not the ones who can hurt us physically. The Greek word, “*Ghehenna*” is translated as hell here. It has a historical background.

On the North Eastern part of Jerusalem, there is a valley called *Hinnom* valley. The Greek words *Ghehenna* and *Ghehinnomare* used to refer to this *Hinnom* Valley. During the time of the rule of the Israel kings, there were altars to offer sacrifices to pagan gods. On certain occasions they offered even human sacrifices (2 Kg 21, 5-6). The prophets strongly denounced such sacrifices (Jer 7, 29-34). Those who returned from Babylon captivity and rebuilt the city of Jerusalem the temple made this valley a place for dumping waste. Since they would burn the waste there, there will be always fire in that place. The worms would crawl through the waste that is wet and not burned. This became a symbol of eternal punishment as there the worms would not die and the fire will not be extinguished. It is from this that the word *Gehenna* came.

More than the literal meaning we need to look into the

reality of the situation. God created man to partake in the Divine life and to live with Him forever. The ultimate desire of each individual is for eternal life with God. But, Jesus reminds us that it is possible that a person might fail to attain this end and become subjected to eternal punishment. That is what He meant by one who has the power to throw you into hell after killing you.

Who has the power to do it? No man has the power to do it. The two possibilities are God and Satan. Some say that Jesus is referring to the power of evil here. As a proof for this, the words of Jesus is used, “He was a murderer from the beginning ... he is a liar and the father of lies” (Jn 8,44). But, we are not talking about death but the judgment after death. According to the Bible, the Satan does not have the power to pronounce the last judgment on man. It is God who judges and so Jesus is not asking to fear neither man nor Satan but God. Then, is it against the previous teaching?

This warning exhorts us to understand the constant call not to fear in the proper sense. Some seem to think that there would be no problem in living whichever way they want and doing whatever they like as there is no limit to mercy of God. He would forgive any sin and so live the way you please. All one has to do is trust in the mercy of God. This is a warning against such erroneous convictions.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love” (1 Jn 4, 18). This stance of John is not against this teaching. One who is in perfected love of God, will not go against the will of God. Hence they have nothing to fear. But, who could achieve this perfection during the life on earth. Who could claim to be above all temptations? Even the son of God was subjected to temptation and there was

a moment of perplexity. In the Garden, Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Mt 26, 39). No one who bears the weakness of human body could claim to be above all temptations.

Hence, we must fear one thing and that is the temptation to go against the will of God for selfish motive, or fearing persecution. Anyone could fail to attain the holiness that would make one unworthy to stand before the God. That is why the Apostle exhorted us, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2,12). It is interesting to note that in the same letter St. Paul has repeated many times not to fear and to remain happy.

“Fear of God” is a gift of the Holy Spirit (Is 11,2). All those who walked into that presence had experienced that fear. For example Moses (Ex 3, 5-6) and Isaiah (Is 6,5). We cannot set it aside as it belongs to the Old Testament. In the New Testament also we can see the emphasis for the fear of God. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10, 31). “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Heb 12, 28). There is no place for boasting before God. If a person is growing in faith and holiness, it is only because of the mercy of God. “Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off” (Rom 11,22).

Fear of God would make us alert diligent in following the precepts of the Lord. “For judgment is without mercy to one

who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2, 13). Therefore we do not have to despair but trust in the mercy of God and at the same time obey the will of God. In case of failures, repent and return to the Lord, like the prodigal son. With an open heart, God the Father would accept us. But, we raise demands like the elder son, we would be thrown out of the Kingdom of God. “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you” (1 Peter 5, 6-7).

If there is any doubt left regarding whom to fear, it will be eliminated by the teaching of Jesus about the Last Judgment. At the end, each person would stand before God and be judged according to his/her actions. Those who failed to be faithful would be thrown into hell. Jesus clarified this teaching through many parables and direct instructions (Mt 7,31;12,32; 15,13;16,26; 18.3-35; 21,41; 22,1-3; 25,12-30).

“When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them ... Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ... Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;... ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Mt 25, 31-46).

There is no doubt there will be a final judgment. It will be Jesus Christ, the son of God who would judge the world. There is a possibility of losing eternal life and so we must with fear trembling work for the salvation. Fear is not curse or a

weakness. It is part of the human nature. God has given us fear to be watchful not to fall into danger. Above all, fear of God is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It helps us to live according to the will of God and to remain respectful and pious before God. This is a healthy fear that would bring salvation. Hence, the exhortation not to fear must not prevent us from living with constant care and alertness to live humbly before God.

## 31 TOM-TOM



*“And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left”*

(Is 30,21).

“After 2000 meters, get off the high way... there is the way out... follow that...you will come across a roundabout... take the third road to the right... after 200 meters there is a junction ... there turn left ... you have reached the destination.”

I heard this strange voice 10 years ago. I had gone as the leader of a tourist group visiting the holy places in Europe. I realized that the voice was coming from the left side of the driver

of the tourist bus. When the bus stopped at a spot, I asked the driver about this strange phenomenon. The driver was Dutch. He told me laughingly, “This is Tom-Tom!” What is that? I did not understand anything. “The Dutch call it ‘Tom-Tom’. In English it is called navigator. The Germans shorten it to ‘navi’. Its scientific name is GPS (Global Positioning System)”. He explained things to me.

Today ‘Tom-Tom’ is universally used for easy navigation. In some of the modern cars, it is a standard item provided by the company itself. It is also available on the mobile phones. The artificial satellites which maintain pictures of all navigable roads supply the information to these Tom-Toms. They tell you where you are at the moment, how far the destination is, and which roads are to be taken to reach there and all such information needed while travelling.

The visual of the road appears on the screen. The information we need will be told to us in the language of our choice. Not only that, if there is some block on a particular road, we will be told to avoid it and take an alternative route. Our Tom-Tom will also tell us the shortest and easiest routes. I thought of the days some 40 years ago when I was driving in some European countries. How many maps I had to refer to make my travels! But today it is so easy, I was amazed.

This thought led me to another realization. Tom-Tom has become so widely used only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even now such a facility is not available to the vast majority of the world population. I also had the rare experience of being misguided by this instrument. I followed the instructions of the Tom-Tom meticulously, but ultimately I reached a forest! The road ended there! In front of me there was only a narrow track for walking! But the Tom-Tom continued instructing me to go forward! I had to then disobey the instructions of the Tom-Tom and get

back to the right track using the traditional maps. At another time I was cruising along a 6-lane highway. Suddenly the Tom-Tom asks me to go back. How? Here also I had to take the help of the good old map. I realized that any man-made instrument can go wrong. I also learnt more significant lessons from these incidents.

The satellites launched by man will contain only information placed there by man. But in each man, God has placed a Tom-Tom. We call it conscience. This is the divine voice that instructs us each moment of our life, and at each occasion where we are required to take a decision. Isn't it about this that Prophet Isaiah, who lived 2750 years ago, said, "When you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it' (Is 30,21)? This instruction will never go wrong. We should be able to recognize the voice of God that speaks to us.

As we stand stunned and stupefied at the crossroads of life not knowing whither to turn, the voice of God will become our guide. He exhorts us through the prophet, "Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it" (Jer 6,16). Just like a shepherd, God will lead the way for all those who rely on him. "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me" (Ps 23,3-4). To take the right decision, turn to the Lord's counsel, just like the psalmist, "Make me know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths" (Ps 25,4).

Our ancestors also taught us some such prayer, '*asathomas-adgamaya, thamasomajyotirgamaya, mrityormaamritamgamaya*'. For this prayer which has been coming out of the hearts of millions of people, God gave a reply through His Son, who is the way, truth and life (Jn 14,6)," 'I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life' (Jn 8,12). This assurance was given only by Jesus, the Word becoming flesh.

This assurance was further fortified by him through another promise. Jesus will send a Helper from the Father to guide the followers. That Holy Spirit will teach all the things. He helps them to take appropriate decisions pleasing to God (Jn 14,26,16,12-15). Not only that, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you" (14,18); "those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (Jn 14,23). Why would we be afraid if the Triune God – the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit – dwells in us shows us the way?

We ought to do only one thing, Listen to that divine voice. One of the ways of listening to the divine voice is reading the Bible. Along with that we should listen to the official teachings of the Church which Jesus established as a way to salvation. Then you will be able to find out if the voice heard inside is that of God, your selfish interests or that the tempter, the evil one. When I was misguided by the Tom-Tom, the map helped me. When that was also not possible I asked the people and those who knew the way guided me to my destination. All these are relevant in our paths of life. Let us therefore proclaim with the psalmist, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 110,105).

## 32 A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH



*“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...See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away”*

(Rev 21,1-4).

There was something special about the temple that Solomon had got built. Once in a year, according to our reckoning on 21 September, the rays of the sun would fall in that temple. The first ray of the rising sun behind the olive mountain would pass the eastern entrance in the wall surrounding the Jerusalem Temple, would go in between the two mammoth bronze pillars, would move above the altar, would pass through the door of the sanctuary and then fall right on the carpet in front of the Arc of the Covenant in the sanctum sanctorum. The first ray of the rising sun, then, would travel only in this straight line. The door on the eastern wall, which is normally kept closed, will be opened only on this day to let the ray enter the sanctum sanctorum.

The people then believed that the Lord God comes from the east and sits on the gracious seat between the cherubs on the Ark of Covenant in the sanctum sanctorum of the Temple. This day when the Lord God ascended the throne was considered the first day of the New Year. The day was known as Rosh Hashanah, which literally means beginning of the year. That day was considered as the day of the Israeli King ascending the throne and was celebrated. This is an explanation of the New Year celebrations. There are many legends and myths, inside the Bible, and outside, among the Jews and other peoples about the New Year. Although there are also many calendars in existence today, the calendar that was formed by Julius Caesar in 454 BC, and which was revised by Pope Gregory XIII, in 1582, is being used the world over as the common calendar. The first one is popularly known as the Julian calendar and the revised one as the Gregorian calendar. According to this, the first month is January. There is a story behind it also.

The Romans had many gods, of whom Janus was one of the most prominent. ‘Janua’ means door and it is from this the

word Janus originated. It would thus mean ‘one who opens the door to the New Year’. Not only that, the image of this has a specialty. It has two similar faces, one in the front and the other at the back.

This image teaches us a very significant thing. Even as we look forward to embrace the New Year, we should not forget the blessings we received, the gains we made and the mistakes we committed in the past. We ought to learn from our past mistakes, rectify them and go forward with greater zeal and strength. This is the message the image of Janus gives us. Even the name Janus gives us a message. A door can be opened and closed. When we open the door for something new, we close it for the old things. We should rectify our errors and go forward. Too much sorrow thinking of the past iniquities will plunge us into depression and despair. Regretting the glories of the bygone days will deplete our strength to go buoyantly forward. So we should be able to bid goodbye to the wounding, bitter and despairing thoughts about the past and move forward with ebullient hope and optimism placing ourselves in the protective hands of God. This picture also gives such a message.

Isn't the same exhortation that echo throughout the Bible? When we are asked to recall the blessings of the past, the Word asks us to bid bye to the past and start life anew. “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing” (Is 43,18-19). Therefore, “Awake, awake, put on your strength” (Is 52,1). “Sing to the Lord a new song” (Is 42,10; Ps 96,1; 98,1). Because, “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lam 3,22-23).

The followers of Christ are those who recognise this truth and practise it in their life. St. Paul, who is among one of the

greatest followers of Christ, gives us a lesson from his life, “I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind” (Phil 3,13) he strains forward. In all his letters the Apostle reminds this truth that he follows no one other than Christ, who vanquished death and rose from the dead. The followers of Christ are new creation. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Cor 5,17). What is important is not immersing oneself in external observations, but the most important is becoming a new creation (Gal 6,15). For that, “clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4,24). God then empowers us to work “in the new life of the Spirit” (Rom 7,6).

The Israelites considered the falling of the first ray of the rising sun on the New Year day on the throne in the sanctum sanctorum of the Jerusalem Temple as the symbol of God's ascending the throne or the establishment of the Kingdom of God. On the New Year Day, we should allow God to take his seat in our hearts; in other words, open the door of our hearts to the Kingdom of Heaven, to the rule from Above. Then we shall be able to enjoy the depth and warmth of the ever new, ever fresh love of God.

The New Year is reckoned on the basis of the north-south movement of the sun. For those who live on the northern side of the equator, the longest night is December 21. Their longest day is June 21. From then the length of the day gets reduced. Darkness becomes more and more intense. Weakening because of his constant fight against the darkness, the sun ‘dies’ or enters the prison of death on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December. But darkness has no power to keep light suppressed or enclosed for long. From the next day the length of the day increases

and this was considered as the resurrection of the sun from death. Thus December 25 is the day on which the Feast of the Invincible Sun was celebrated. Following that on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January there is the New Year day festivities. This also has some symbolic significance.

Very often in life darkness spreads and the mind is overwhelmed with sorrow and despair. But we need not be afraid. The Son of God, the righteous Sun, who vanquished the dark powers of evil, will shed his light upon us. Then our hearts will be filled with joy and hope. This is not a hollow feeling or the daydream of the weak. This is something that God himself has promised us. This ever-abiding truth is presented to us in the form of a vision by the author of the Book of Revelation: “I saw a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 23:1,1). The Bible ends with the assurance “Surely I am coming soon” (Rev 22:20) and this shows the hope and the basis necessary for such a hope in the New Year. With the author of the Book of Revelation, let us also say, “Come, Lord Jesus! (*Maranatha!*)” (Rev 22:20).