

GOSPEL OF THE CROSS



MICHAEL KARIMATTAM

TRANSLATED BY: GLORISTA ARAKAL SABS

GOSPEL OF THE CROSS

Cross is a sign of contradiction and causes confusion. When we try to avoid cross and suffering by all means, we are rejecting the Crucified Lord. Gospel of wealth and prosperity is more attractive than the invitation to partake in His suffering. The temptation to win the crown without the cross is today greater than ever. When we give in to that temptation we are missing the essence of Christian discipleship. The message of the Cross is the message of salvation. The search for this message in the light of the Word of God leads us to the forgotten but central message of the Cross.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Karimattam, a Catholic Priest, belonging to the Archdiocese of Tellicherry, Kerala, India. Born 1942; ordained priest, Rome 1968; holds a Licentiate in Theology from the Pontifical Urban University, Rome and a Doctorate in Sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome. Has served as one of the three Chief Editors of the POC Malayalam Bible; 15 years as Director, Bible Apostolate of Tellicherry; 4 years as Principal of Divine Bible College, Muringoor. Since 2002 teaches Scripture at the Marymatha Major Seminary, Trichur, India.



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ISBN 978-93-7495-668-7



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2016

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Published by:

Media House™

375-A, Pocket 2, Mayur Vihar Phase-I

Delhi - 110 091, India

Tel: 91-11-43042096, 91-9555642600, 91-7042752030

E-mail: mediahousedelhi@gmail.com

info.mhdelhi@gmail.com

www.mediahouseonline.in

Design & Layout:

Foxview Media

info@foxviewmedia.com

www.foxviewmedia.com

Printed at:

Jyoti Printers

C12, Sector 8, Noida-201301, U.P., India

Tel: 0120-2424112, 2424113, 2424114

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Price: ₹ 150, US\$ 15

ISBN: 978-93-7495-668-7



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INTRODUCTION

On Sunday mornings it is very common to see Christians going in large crowds to Church. Not so big a crowd can be seen going to Church on Saturdays and other week days. This phenomenon has been going on for the last 2000 years. Where are these people going and for what? What are they doing in Church? It is not a simple prayer meeting that takes place in the Church. Something more powerful is going on there. A reenactment of an event that changed the course of human history and renewed the face of the earth is taking place every morning in the Church. These people are going to Church to celebrate that event with the Christian community gathered for the same purpose. That event is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this book we are trying to look into the historical background and significance of that great event.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part we try to see the death of Jesus on the Cross from various angles. Starting from the most obvious facts we try, in the light of the Word of God, to delve into the inscrutable mystery of the death of the Son of God. Viewed in the light of historical facts the death of Jesus can be seen as the most cruel murder the world has ever witnessed and the martyrdom of a prophet. But when we look at the same events in the light of faith many other dimensions will come to light. It was the self-sacrifice Jesus Christ the Incarnate son of God, out of love for us, freely offered to the Father. Through that sacrifice humanity has been reconciled with God; fraternal relation between humans broken through sin has been

restored; eternal life has been made available to mortals. The crucified Son of God has become the redeemer of humanity.

In the second part of the book we make a detailed analysis of the seven Words Jesus spoke from the cross. We start with the most difficult and mysterious cry from the cross and end with the peaceful surrendering of His life into the Father's hands. These words of Jesus present the gospel message in a nut shell. The mountain called Moriah in the OT and Golgotha in the NT stands between Sinai the mountain of the Old Covenant and the mountain of the Sermon where Jesus expounded the New Covenant. The cross erected on that mountain has become the highest pulpit of the world. The words that flowed from that pulpit are the essence of the Gospel.

This book is not a comprehensive study of the mystery of the cross. I have tried only to pick out and highlight some of the most relevant and important aspects of that mystery. However, it is my earnest hope that this will help at least some people not to despair in the face of trials and tribulations, tragedies and disasters of life but consider them as a call to participate in the cross of Christ and as a means of salvation.



PART - I

THE
CRUCIFIED
LORD

HISTORICAL FACTS

It is not surprising that not much is written about Jesus Christ in the historical records that depicts the military expeditions and rise and fall of empires. Because Jesus did not wage any wars or capture lands or establish an empire. He did not build any lasting monuments to his name. Yet, he was a person whose life divided the world history in to two - A.D. and B.C. Considering the year Jesus was born as “0”, the years Before Christ are recorded as “B.C.” and years after Christ are recorded as “A.D.” (Anno Domini).

Palestine is a small land about half the size of Kerala, situated on the East bank of Mediterranean Sea. From ancient times it was occupied by Canaanites and so it was called Canaan. Later the Philistines occupied the land and it began to be known as Palestine, meaning Land of the Philistines. Since God promised to give this land to Abraham and his descendants it was also called the Promised Land. Above all, this area is called the “Holy Land” because Jesus Christ fulfilled His redemptive mission, living in this area. Today it is called Israel because it belongs to the Israelites.

Situated in the northern side of this land is Lake Galilee. Traveling 25 Km to the south of Galilee, one can reach Nazareth, a village where Jesus lived as the son of Mary and Joseph, a village carpenter who belonged to the tribe of Judah. He was born in Bethlehem, the city of David, now a small town about 7 Km south of Jerusalem. Luke the Evangelist has recorded the

particular events that led to his birth in the 1st and 2nd chapters of his Gospel. Another description of the same event is recorded in the first two chapters of the Gospel of Mathew. Though Jesus was known as the son of Joseph, in reality he did not have a human father. By the miraculous intervention of God, he was born of a virgin.

The name Jesus is derived from the Hebrew name Joshua which means “Saviour”. Joshua is the abbreviation of “Yehoshua” and further of Yahweh-Shua which means Yahweh is the Saviour or Yahewh saves. The word Christ is Greek word that means one who is anointed. In Israel, there was a practice of anointing priests and kings. The people of Israel believed that God would send an anointed one to save them whom they called “the Messiah” the anointed one. Jesus Christ is a name that proclaims that Jesus is the anointed one in whom this hope is fulfilled.

Until the age of thirty Jesus lived in Nazareth as an ordinary carpenter. This hidden life of Jesus came to an end with the emergence of John the Baptist who invited the people to accept a baptism of repentance. Large crowds came to be baptized in Jordan. Jesus also came to receive the baptism. Although John was reluctant to baptize him, he complied with the wish of Jesus. At that time, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in the form of a dove. A voice was heard from heaven, proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God. This marked the beginning of his public life. In preparation for his mission, Jesus went into the wilderness and he spent forty days in prayer and fasting.

After returning from the wilderness, he began to proclaim the Good News in Galilee. He went to wherever people gathered, not only to Synagogues where the Jews gathered to pray but also to the shores of Lake Galilee, the boats of the fishermen, to private homes, and public places. He announced that the

Kingdom of God which they were waiting for through centuries is at hand. God is offering His unconditional love and salvation here and now and exhorted them to open their hearts to accept this offer of God. He spoke in a popular style, using examples from their everyday life, so that the ordinary people could easily understand him

Jesus called this gratuitous gift of God, offered to everyone in the world, the Kingdom of God and welcomed all to enter it. He assured the people that God loves each one and offers the grace to become the children of God, in spite of their sinful nature. The only condition set to enter the Kingdom was that he/she must believe and it should be demonstrated through genuine repentance of their sins. They must follow a new lifestyle that manifests this faith and repentance. In clear and simple language he taught them the way to embrace this new life style. He proved the authenticity of his teaching through his actions. By his word and touch lepers became clean, blind saw, deaf heard, lame walked, water became wine, paralytics got up and walked, evil spirits were cast out and dead persons became alive.

Thousands gathered around him. He taught the people with authority. Even the nature obeyed his command; cyclonic storms stood and raging seas calmed down. All those who came to him, weighed down by their sins with a broken heart found solace in his presence. No one was disappointed. The least in the society received the most from him. The dignity of the poor and the marginalized were restored, for they were raised to the status of the children of God. He touched the impure and out-casts and made them whole. He ate with sinners and tax collectors. He welcomed women and appreciated their good deeds. All were consoled because they experienced the merciful love of God emanating from him. They experienced the tender loving care of God the father



All those who were aware of their need for salvation accepted and followed Jesus. But, those who considered themselves to be holy and very close to God, such as the Pharisees and Jewish leaders could not understand him or appreciate the message of love he was proclaiming. From the very beginning they observed him with a skeptical mind. They interpreted many of his words as blasphemy and actions as deeds against the laws of Yahweh. They could not tolerate him forgiving sins or calling God, Father. According to Jewish law these were crimes deserving death by stoning.

The Jewish leaders moved strategically and took calculated steps against Jesus. First, they questioned his teachings in public but could not succeed to prove him to be wrong in any way. The responses Jesus gave were such that they silenced the ones who went to interrogate him. Then they tried character assassination by damaging his reputation in public and prevent people from following him. They accused him of breaking the law, associating with the sinners and ill reputed people. They even depicted him as one out of his mind and possessed by an evil spirit and even argued that he was exorcising evil- spirits by Satan, the prince of the demon.

Since these efforts for character assassination did not bear fruit, the Jewish leaders decided to unleash violence against Jesus. They tried many times to stone him to death and even sent soldiers to arrest him. But, the people protected him, surrounding him like a fortress, so that they could not touch him. Hence they tried to intimidate the people by proclaiming a ban on those who acknowledged and supported Jesus. When that also proved ineffective, the Jewish authority directed all the power of the establishment against Jesus.

The supreme authority of the Jewish religion was vested in the Sanhedrin, a body of the leaders of the Jewish people. The

Sanhedrin had 70 members under the supreme authority of the High Priest. This body, met to discuss the case of Jesus in his absence and, without a trial, condemned him to death. Though a few of the members tried to point out that it was against justice to condemn one without giving him a hearing, their voice fell on deaf ears. This decision was made at the third Passover after the starting of Jesus' public ministry. The Passover was an occasion when most people gathered in Jerusalem

During the day time, Jesus taught in public and in the evening withdrew to some unknown place. Since Jesus enjoyed public support, the leaders were afraid to arrest him during the day. They did not know where he stayed at night. Hence, they bribed one of his disciples to betray his where about at night. With the help of Judas, the Jewish authority arrested Jesus while he was praying in the garden of Gethsemane. It was around midnight



that they arrested him and brought him to the Sanhedrin for a quick trial. They could not bring any substantial accusations against him. Finally the High Priest asked the decisive question: “In the name of the living God tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God”, to which Jesus gave an unequivocal answer: “Yes”. The trial ended there. The High Priest tore his cloak which indicated that what Jesus said was blasphemy and so he deserved to die. However at that time the Jews did not have the power to execute capital punishment.

Palestine was under the dominion of the Roman Empire which reserved to itself the authority to execute capital punishment. At that time, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor was in Jerusalem. Hence, early morning they brought Jesus to Pilate. They knew that Rome would not care if some one did not observe the religious laws and so they accused him of sedition and inciting people to violate political laws. They accused that Jesus opposed giving tax to the Roman Empire and instigated insurrection all through Palestine, proclaiming him-self to be the king of the Jews.

The people of Palestine were unhappy with Rome and wanted to get rid of the Roman rule. They nurtured the hope that either a king like David or a prophet like Moses would come to liberate them from the Roman domination. Galilee was the center of Zealots who were resolved to drive the Romans out of the country through armed revolt. They used to come to Jerusalem, during festival times and encourage people to revolt against Rome. One of their leaders, Barabbas was in prison for killing a Roman soldier. Under these circumstances, Pilate might have taken seriously the accusations they made against Jesus. Hence he agreed to question Jesus.

Jesus did not speak much. He neither justified himself nor explained anything. Pilate could not understand the few words

he spoke. Pilate asked him if he was the king of the Jews. His replied, “My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingdom is not from the world” (Jn 18, 36). To Pilate’s next question “So you are a king” Jesus replied, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice” (Jn 18, 37).

Pilate became convinced that Jesus was innocent and all the accusations against him were white-lies fabricated by the Jews, motivated by their selfish interests. However, he was afraid to offend the Jewish leaders and so decided to have a popular trial. Every year Rome used to free a convicted criminal during the Passover feast. Barabbas, a criminal was brought out and the Governor asked the people to choose between them. Pilate had hoped that the people would consent to the release of Jesus. However, the zealots encouraged the people to ask for Barabbas while the Jewish leaders instructed them that they should demand Jesus to be crucified. Seeing that Jesus, though innocent, had to be condemned to death, Pilate washed his hands to show that he had no part in that unjust verdict.

The Roman soldiers took Jesus out of the city, to the hill called Golgotha and crucified him. On a board, above the head, they usually wrote the crime committed by the person. Above Jesus, they wrote, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”. It proclaimed that he instigated rebellion against Rome by making himself King. To emphasize the nature of the crime, they crucified two criminals on either side of Jesus. The gospels call them robbers, but in reality they were revolutionaries like Barabbas. All who stood around and passed by mocked him. They challenged him to come down from the cross if he were the Son of God. They ridiculed him saying that he saved others but

could save himself. But, Jesus did not hate those who crucified him or laughed at him. He prayed for them: “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing”.

Rejected by all, apparently even by God, Jesus hung on the cross, between the earth and the sky. He felt so lonely and abandoned that he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15, 34). There was no answer from the Father. He did not come down to save His only son. Suffering indescribable pain Jesus hung on the Cross about three hours. At the end He cried out to the Father, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit”. His friends took the body down and buried in a tomb nearby. As they closed the mouth of the tomb, they thought it was the end of everything. But, it was only the beginning!

Jewish leaders were still afraid of him. They remembered that Jesus had said that he would return to life on the third day. Hence with the permission of Pilate, they appointed soldiers to guard the tomb. However, they could not contain Jesus in the tomb. Sunday morning, the tomb was opened and the body of Jesus was not there. The guards did not know what happened. Hearing this, the Jewish leaders bribed the guards to say that the disciples had stolen the body.

Even the disciples were shocked at first. They too did not know what had happened. Then Jesus appeared to them and assured them He has risen from the dead. To convince them, he had to show them the wounds in his hands, legs and side. He ate with them to show that he was no ghost. He commissioned them to go to the ends of the earth and proclaim the Good News that He is risen and has achieved victory over death. The gates of heaven are now open for all those who believe in Him. He also promised the disciples that he would be with them, with us, to the end of the age.

2

DEATH OF JESUS: A HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

From the historical point of view, the death of Jesus was a deliberate murder as well as a heroic martyrdom.

a. Murder

Upon revealing the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, “the high priest tore his garments,... and they all condemned



him as deserving death”(Mk 14, 63-64). Jesus was proved to be innocent in the trial conducted by Pilate, the Roman Governor, yet, he was condemned to die on a cross. Both courts went through a mock trial. For all practical purposes, it was a preplanned murder.

The Jewish leaders watched Jesus with a suspicious eye from the very beginning of his public life. They observed every move he made and kept on looking for an opportunity to do away with him. Many times they tried to confront him and accuse him but never could prove him to be wrong. This made them more furious. They interpreted his actions as breaking of the law and his teaching as blasphemy: “It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mk 3, 7); “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mk 3, 16). The answers Jesus gave left them dumb-founded. He asked them, “Which of you convicts me of sin?” (John 8:46). The Pharisees and scribes branded him as one out of his mind (Mk. 3,21); as one possessed by demon (Jn 7,20.10,20). They accused him of casting out devils by the help of Satan (Mk 3,22). All these were attempts to alienate the people from Jesus. They tried to arrest him (Jn 7, 30-32.45; 8, 20; 10, 39; Lk 20, 19) and even stone him to death (Lk 4, 29; Jn 8, 59; 10, 31). When all these attempts failed, they conspired to kill him. They bribed one of his disciples to betray him and after a quick trial at night he was condemned to death.

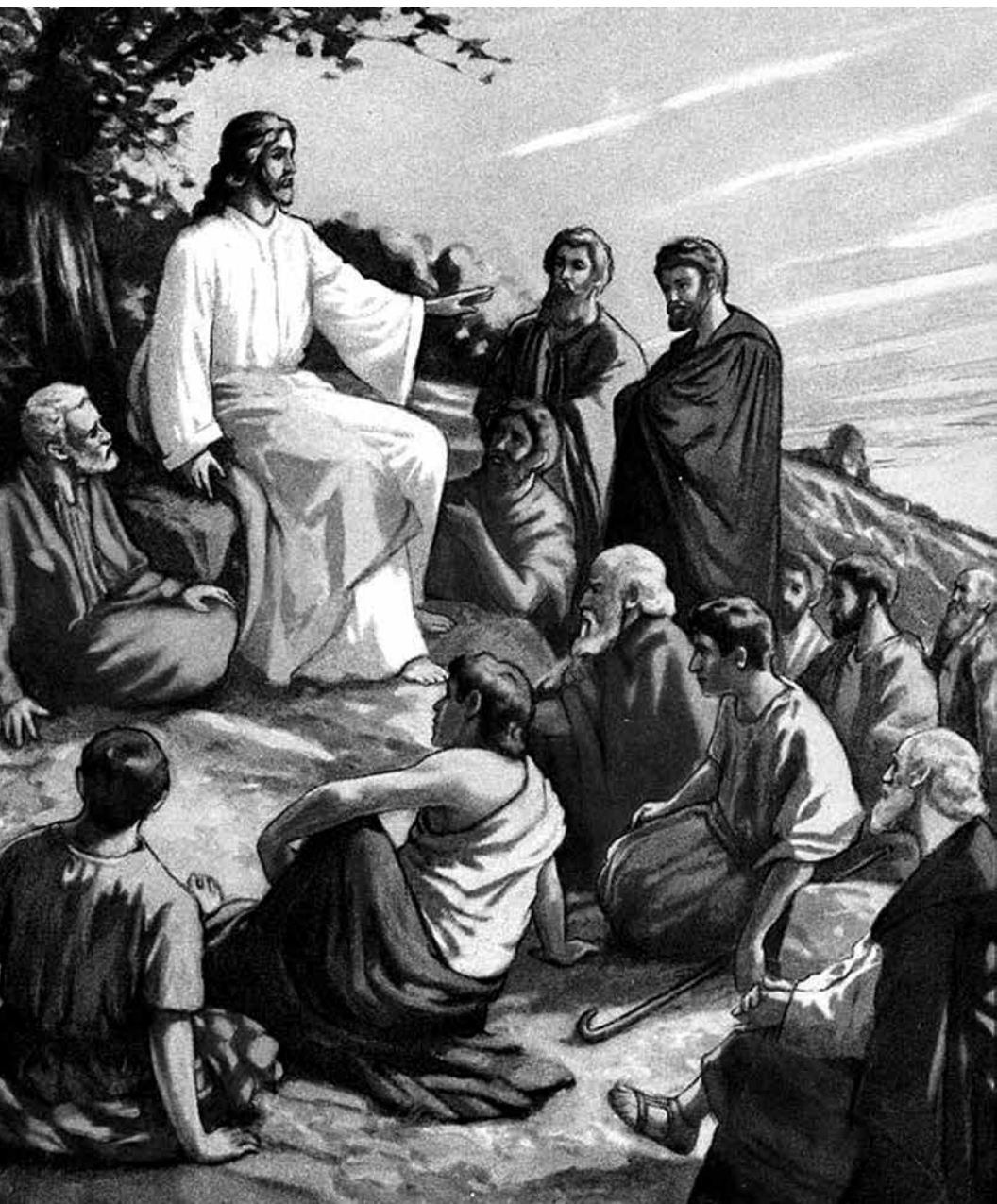
We see a similar procedure in the political trial also. Nobody could prove anything wrong in him. Pilate admitted his innocence and announced it in public (Lk 23, 4-15; Jn 18,38; 19,4.6). Pilate wanted to free Jesus “for he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up” (Mark 15:10). King Herod also tried him but found no guilt in him (Lk 23, 6-15). Again and again it was proved that Jesus was innocent. However, Pilate did not have the integrity to free

him. Succumbing to the pressure of the Jewish hierarchy, he freed Barabbas, a convicted criminal and condemned Jesus, the innocent one to be crucified. Thus, he tarnished the Roman code of ethics and became a paradigm of corrupt judge.

Why did it happen? Why did the Jewish hierarchy turn against Jesus? From the human point of view and historical facts, it was the way Jesus taught and acted that forced the Jewish leaders to turn against him. Sabbath was the most important law for the Jews. The law itself came from God, but its original meaning was distorted by later interpretations. Jesus gave little value to such interpretations and this scandalized them. The law was made to insure rest for the hard working people and to give them time to pray. Jesus tried to bring the people back to the original spirit of the law and declared that the law was made for people “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”(Mk 2, 27).

Jesus opposed all that enslaves human beings. His life-style and actions rebelled against laws that discriminate people on the basis of the trades one practiced and physical condition; laws that stamped food as clean and unclean and traditions that violated human dignity (Mk 7, 14-23). He spoke against them and disregarded those laws anywhere and everywhere. The Jewish leaders felt that he was shaking the very foundations of Jewish religion. They felt that he was pulling down all that they considered sacred.

The triumphal entry to Jerusalem and the subsequent cleansing of the temple and infuriated the Jewish leadership. Thousands of people from Galilee gathered around Jesus and cheered Jesus as he entered the city on a donkey, as a king of peace. The people acclaimed him as the King of the Jews, the long awaited Messiah, the son of David. He proceeded to drive out the merchants and money changers from the Temple



ground. The Jewish hierarchy saw this as an attack on the temple, an encroachment on their socio-economic authority and privileges, and a threat to the very existence of the Jewish religion as they saw, interpreted and lived it. So they decided to use all their power to do away with him.

Though the leaders opposed, most of ordinary people accepted and followed Jesus. Thousands gathered to hear him preach. They considered him as the Messiah, the One they awaited for centuries. His popularity further disturbed the leaders. They felt that they were losing ground with the people. To add fuel to the fire, Jesus severely criticized the Jewish leaders. He exposed the futility of their empty rituals and hypocritical teachings (Lk 11, 39-52; Mt 23, 1-32). They realized that they were losing their hold on the people. "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." (Jn 11,47-48). They also feared that the activities of Jesus would cause the poor and down trodden to rise up and demand for their rightful place in the society and that it would provoke the Romans to take revenge on the whole Jewish society. However, the hypocrisy of this fear became evident when they demanded Barabbas to be freed instead of Jesus. Though it was done through the court, no doubt, the death of Jesus was a calculated murder

b. Heroic Martyrdom

When we look at the death of Jesus from another point of view, we can see that it was a heroic martyrdom. Jesus was put to death for the courageous stand he took against the religious and political leaders who oppressed the poor and common people with unjust laws, undue fear of God, heavy taxes, discrimination based on birth and occupation etc. At the very

beginning of his public ministry, Jesus proclaimed: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Lk 4,18-19). His martyrdom was a natural consequence of the uncompromising stand he took against the exploitation of the poor and the marginalized. Protecting and liberating the people from oppression was the sacred mission, God the Father entrusted to Jesus, and death was the price he paid.

The religious laws of the Jews controlled every segment of human life. Many were considered as outcasts based on their birth, trade, physical condition, gender and religion. Jesus strongly opposed and severely criticized their discriminatory laws and began to teach people that God is a loving Father who is kind and merciful to every human being, irrespective of cast and creed. His words and deeds restored their status as the children of God. He expressed special love and care to those who were forced out of the main stream of the society. When Jesus embraced a leper (Mk 1, 41), ate with tax collectors and sinners (Mt. 9,10-13) and accepted the love and service of prostitutes (Lk 7, 38), he was demonstrating preferential love for the oppressed and down trodden

The economic structure that promoted accumulation of the wealth in the hands of a few, leaving the vast majority in utter poverty also became subject of his severe criticism (Lk 6,20-26). He taught that accumulated wealth will not provide security and the rich who live in luxury would meet eternal damnation, if they ignore the poor (Lk 12,15-21; 16,19-31). Therefore he invited the rich to share their wealth with the poor (Lk 11, 41; 16,9; 18,22). If they refused to do so, they will be denied admission into the Kingdom of God. "It is easier for a camel

to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Mark 10, 25). Because of his criticism against the rich, many rich people were offended, hated and turned against him.

Jesus did not show a submissive and docile attitude toward political structure either. In God's plan, there is room for political authority and laws. But it is not to be used to oppress others. In the view of Jesus, though authority is given by God (Jn 19, 11) worldly domination and oppression are not only evil but also diabolic, and the authority of the world and its power and position were considered as evil (Lk 4, 5-6). Authority is given not to rule over but to serve (Lk 22, 25-26). When Herod tried to prevent him from continuing his work and plotted to kill him, Jesus retorted with strong words: "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course'" (Luke 13, 32). While questioned about giving taxes to Rome, Jesus replied "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22,21), implying thereby that Caesar is also under God's authority and thereby denying the absolute claim of kings and emperors.

If all the people are considered as the children of God with equal rights and dignity, power and position built on discrimination will fall apart. There is no longer room for domination and supremacy. Hence, the position Jesus took was against categorizing people as superiors and inferiors, rulers and servant. Though Jesus did not advocate any revolution, his teaching was a threat to the existing power structure. One can suppress armed revolution by force ideological change cannot be suppressed with weapons. If everybody followed his call to forgiving love, who will be ready to take up arms to fight? Where will the emperor find soldiers to protect and expand his empire?

That might be the reason why Pilate to considered Jesus the pacifist to be more dangerous than Barabbas the revolutionary for the Roman Empire.

Thus, the position Jesus took in the religious, economic, social and political spheres was the reason behind the death of Jesus. Though Jesus saw the Cross looming in the horizon, and the number of followers fast dwindling, he did not hesitate or turn back or water down his teachings. In spite of all the objections and oppositions, he went forward with his teachings and activities with prophetic courage and that led him to the Cross. He is a martyr who offered his life for love and truth.

C. Inevitable End

Observing from the outside, we may consider many to be responsible for the death of Jesus. At the top of the list is Judas who betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver. The religious authorities who from the beginning, watched Jesus with suspicion and finally made calculated moves to condemn him to death are also responsible for his execution. The Roman authority also who handed him over to be crucified even after his innocence was proven is guilty of this crime. All the same, each party had sufficient and compelling reasons to justify their action.

The Jewish leaders were committed to preserve the faith of the people through strict observance of religious laws and regulations. They could not but be concerned about the attitude Jesus adopted toward laws and regulation. Disobeying the laws and encouraging others to do the same was a serious offence. However, the greatest offence of all was his claim that he was the Son of God. As far as they could see, he was just a carpenter from an unknown village called Nazareth. For him to make such a claim, they thought, he was must be either be a mad man

or a blasphemer. But there was no reason to consider Jesus mad. So they concluded that he was a Blasphemer.

The Belief that God is one was the foundation of the people of Israel. It was the corner stone of their faith: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (Dt 6,4). They could not imagine that anyone else could claim equality with God. But this was implied in the words and deeds of Jesus and stated openly in Jesus’ answer to the Sanhedrin. This they could see only as the most serious blasphemy. The Jewish people did not know that God revealed Himself through Jesus. Neither could they believe that Yahweh is a communion of three persons, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Hence we cannot accuse them of deliberate crime but believe that it was an inevitable event in the history of salvation. The followers of Christ themselves came to understand this mystery of the inner life of God only after the death and resurrection of Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit.

While the Jewish leaders could not accept the Divinity of Jesus, the Roman authority could not accept his claim of kingship. Though Jesus had said that his kingdom did not belong to this world, Pilate could not conceive of any such kingdom. If anyone in the empire claimed to be a king, it was a threat to the emperor and so he had to be considered a traitor or a revolutionary. Because of human limitation, the Jewish leaders as well as Roman authority misunderstood Jesus and they worked together to crucify him. In short, it is futile to seek who was responsible for imposing the most painful death on Jesus. What is important is to search, in the light of faith, more deeply into what the Bible says about the person and death of Jesus.



GOD'S PLAN - OLD TESTAMENT

The life of Jesus that ended at the age 33, in a dreadful execution on the Cross can only be considered as an utter failure from the point of view of the world. There is no room for him in the history that record the account of world leaders who waged wars, established empires and performed heroic deed. In the eyes of the world, Jesus was only a simple man whose life was a failure. Even for the disciples it was not easy to believe in him and proclaim him as the Lord and Savior of the world. Then as well as now, The crucifixion of Jesus is a stumbling block even for those who sincerely wants to follow him.

For the Jews, cursed is the one who died on the Cross. “A hanged man is accursed by God” (Deut. 21, 23). Hence, the crucifixion was a scandal and an insurmountable obstacle for the Jews to believe in Jesus. Those who are not Jews question the wisdom of accepting one who was rejected, suffered and crucified, as Savior or Messiah. St. Paul acknowledged this but still proclaimed: “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 22 – 23).

What prompted the disciples of Jesus to uphold this apparent failure as the source of salvation for the humanity? What made

them to come out of the hiding and proclaim in public that Jesus whom the Jews crucified was really the Messiah? Hearing their talks thousands were converted and accepted Jesus as the Lord and Savior. Two incidents that followed the death of Jesus, namely the resurrection of Jesus and descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples stand at the root of these dramatic changes. After the resurrection Jesus appeared to the disciples many times and assured them that his death was not the end but the beginning of everything. Upon receiving the Holy Spirit, the disciples gained courage to come out of the hiding and to proclaim publicly the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It was at first difficult for the disciples to believe that the one who stood before them was the very Jesus who died and was buried. He had to show them the wounds and eat with them to convince them it was none other than their Lord and Master. "But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, he took it and ate it before them" (Lk 24, 37–43).

Evangelist Luke has presented another experience of the disciples. On the third day after Jesus' death, two of the disciples were going to a village named Emmaus, about eight km from Jerusalem. They were thoroughly disappointed and were discussing about what had happened in the holy city. On the way stranger joined them and they shared with him their hopes and expectations about Jesus and their frustration about the way things turned out. They did not realize that the unknown travel companion was Jesus. He said to them, "O foolish men,

and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk 24, 25-27). They were impressed and invited him to stay with them. While they were sitting at table, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. Immediately they recognized him. From the words Jesus spoke on the way the disciples understood that the death of Jesus was no casual event, but, the fulfillment of God's plan and that it was foretold in several books of the Old Testament.

As Jesus had promised the disciples received the Holy Spirit. "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:1-4). At the last supper Jesus had told them: "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:12-13). Before Ascending into heaven, Jesus had asked them to remain in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit (Lk 24,29; Acts 1,8). What happened on the day of Pentecost was the fulfillment of this promise.

The Holy Spirit filled the disciples with courage and wisdom. They began to look at the life and death of Jesus and the Sacred Scripture in a new light. They realized that the prophecies in the Old Testament were fulfilled in Jesus. The true identity of Jesus

was also revealed to them. Thus, fulfilling the promise Jesus had made to them, the Holy Spirit led them to the fullness of Truth.

a. Prophecies in the Old Testament

The disciples who witnessed the passion and death of Jesus realized that many things that happened in connection with the death of Jesus were already recorded in the Old Testament. There are hints about the suffering and death of the Messiah in many parts of the Bible. The clearest statements are found in Psalm 22 and chapter 53 of the book of Isaiah. In all four Gospels, the two chapters just preceding the last chapter deal with the passion and death of Jesus. The evangelists either quoted or alluded to the Old Testament prophecies regarding the passion and death of Jesus. The most important of them are listed below. The Gospel of St. Mathew has been used as a basis in forming the list. References from other passages in the NT are also indicated -

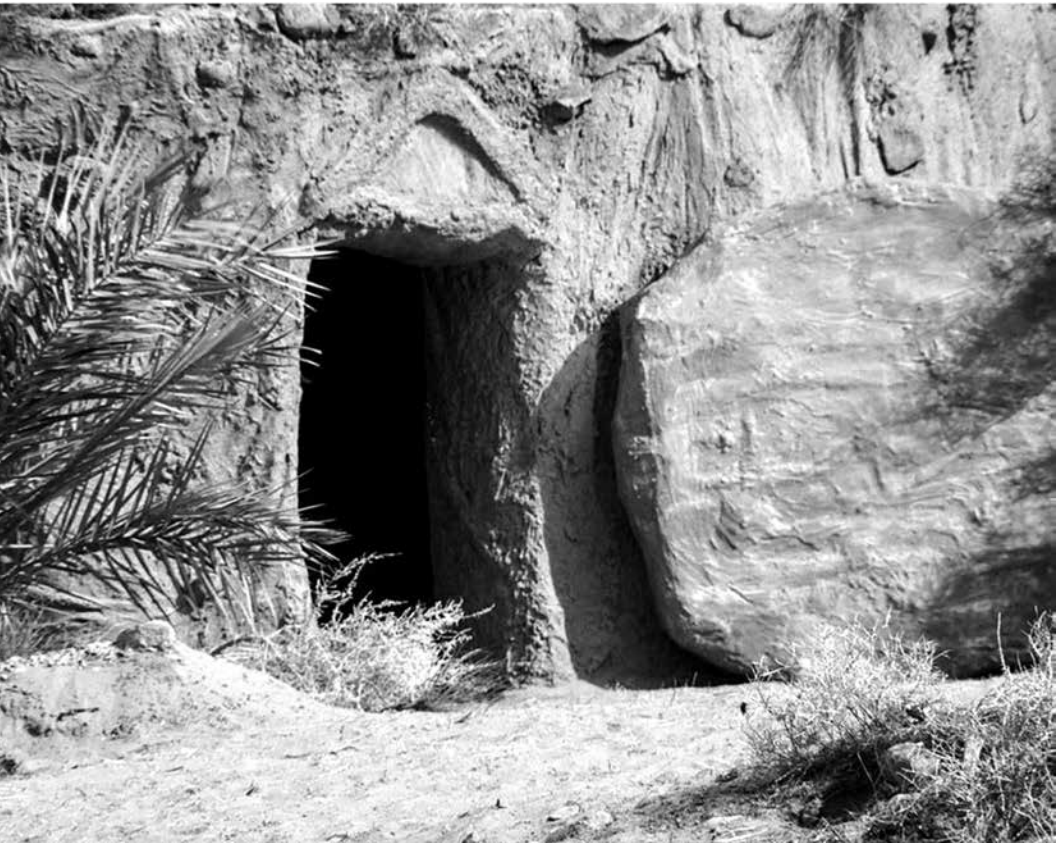
1. ***Conspiracy to kill Jesus:*** “Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and took counsel together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him” (Mt 26:3). "Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training” (Wis. 2,12). In the Acts of the Apostles we see, “The kings of the earth set themselves in array, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’ (Ps. 2, 2) - “for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel” (Acts 4:26 – 27).

2. ***Thirty pieces of silver was the reward for betraying Jesus:*** "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver (Mt 26:15). In Prophet Zachariah it is written, "So they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver... this lordly price at which I was valued by them. So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them into the treasury in the house of the LORD (Zec 11:12-13)
3. ***Betrayed by the Bosom Friend:*** "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me" (Mt 26:23). In the Psalm we see, "Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me" (Ps 41,9).
4. ***The deep Distress of Jesus:*** "I am deeply grieved, even to death" (Mt 26:38). It is written in the book of Psalms "My soul is cast down within me" (Ps 42,6)
5. ***Blood of the Covenant:*** "For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Mt 26:28) "because of the blood of my covenant with you I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit".(Zech 9,11).
6. ***When Jesus was arrested the disciples ran away:*** "Then Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'" (Mt 26:31) "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is my associate," says the LORD of hosts. Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered" (Zech 13, 7).
7. ***Jesus accepted death as willed by the Father:*** Throwing himself on the ground Jesus prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (Mt 26, 39). "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire ... Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."(Ps 40, 6–8).

8. ***Many gave False Witnesses against Jesus:*** “Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death” (Mt. 26,59) In the Psalm it is written, “for false witnesses have risen against me,” (Ps 27,12).
9. ***Jesus was silent in the midst of trial and persecution:*** “Jesus was silent” (Mt 26, 63). Prophet Isaiah has written “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Is 53,7).
10. ***They Flogged Jesus:*** “After flogging Jesus” (Mt. 27, 26) as it was written in Isaiah, “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities” (Is 53, 5).
11. ***They Mocked Jesus:*** “They... knelt before him and mocked him” (Mt 27,29). Prophet Isaiah wrote, “He was despised, and we held him of no account” (Is 53, 3).
12. ***They took Jesus to crucify him:*** “Then they led him away to crucify him” (Mt 27,31). Prophet Isaiah wrote, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Is. 53, 7).
13. ***Jesus was counted as a cinner:*** “two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left” (Mt 27, 38; Lk 22, 37). According to Prophet Isaiah he “was numbered with the transgressors” (Is 53, 12).
14. ***Hands and feet nailed to the cross:*** “When they had crucified him” (Mt 27,35) “They pierced My hands and feet” (Ps 22,16).
15. ***Friends of Jesus watched from afar:*** “Many women were also there, looking on from a distance” (Mt. 27, 55). “My friends

and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my neighbors stand far off” (Ps 38,11).

16. ***They cast lot for his garment:*** “when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots” (Mt. 27, 35; (Jn 19, 23 - 24). It was written in the Psalm “they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots” (Ps 22,18).
17. ***They gave Jesus vinegar to drink:*** “At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink” (Mt 27,48). “They gave me poison for food and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink” (Ps 69, 21).
18. ***Many mocked Jesus:*** “Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads... The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way” (Mt 27, 39-44). “All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads” (Ps. 22, 7).
19. ***Jesus cried with a loud voice:*** “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’ (Mt 27,46). The psalmist has the same words:“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”(Ps. 22, 1).
20. ***At noon darkness came over the land:*** “From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon” (Mt. 27, 45) “On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon , and darken the earth in broad daylight” (Am 8,9).
21. ***The final prayer of Jesus:*** “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last” (Lk 23, 46) repeats verbatim from the psalm: “Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God” (Ps 31, 5).
22. ***The bones of Jesus were not broken:*** “None of his bones shall



be broken” (Jn 19, 36) as it is written in the Book of Exodus about the paschal lamb: “You shall not break any of its bones” (Ex 12, 46).

23. *Jesus’ side was pierced*: “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear” (Jn 19,34). This was as is written in the Book of Zechariah: “they look on the one whom they have pierced” (Zech 12,10).
24. *Seeing the death of Jesus the crowd wept*: “they returned home, beating their breasts”(Lk 23,48). This was the reaction foretold by the prophet: “They look on the one

whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him” (Zech 12,10).

- 25. *Jesus was buried in the tomb of a rich man:*** “They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths ... the tomb was nearby they laid Jesus there” (Jn 19, 39-42). This was already foretold by Isaiah concerning the suffering servant: “They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich” (Is 53,9).

In the Old Testament there are references not only about the passion and death but also about the Resurrection of Jesus. Psalm 22 that depicts the passion ends with a picture of the glorification of the afflicted one. Besides Psalm 22, the following references in the Old Testament also contain hints to the resurrection.

Psalm 16,10: “For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit”.

Hosea 6, 2: “After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up”.

Isaiah 53, 10: “When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge”.

b. Symbols and prototypes in the Old Testament

Besides the prophecies there are also some symbolic presentations that refer to the passion and death of Jesus in the Old Testament. Listed below are the four most important ones

1. *Abel: Gen 4,1-8:*

God accepted Abel’s innocent nature and good intention and

so accepted his sacrifice. Cain became jealous and killed him. Killed by his own brother, Abel became the symbol of Jesus who was rejected and killed by His own people.

2. Isaac: Gen 22,1-18:

Isaac is the only son born for Abraham in Sara. God said to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you". So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ... Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son. When they reached the place, appointed by God, Abraham made an altar, laid the wood and bound Isaac to it" ... Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.... "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me. Then God showed him a ram in the bush" ... Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. Thus Abraham sacrificed Isaac and at the same time got him back alive. Isaac symbolizes Jesus who carried the Cross to Golgotha, died on the Cross and rose from death.

3. The Paschal Lamb, Ex 12, 1 – 14 :

The feast of Passover celebrated the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. In that night of God's mighty intervention in favour of the people of Israel, the exterminating



angel passed through the houses killing all the first born sons of the Egyptians but the Israelites were spared because they had followed the instructions given by God: “They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it... It is the Passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt... The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you” Thus the lamb slaughtered for the Passover meal whose blood saved the Israelites from death became a symbol of Jesus. By the Blood of Jesus, humanity is saved from the real death by sin.

4. The lamb of sin offering, Lev 16:

Israel observed the tenth day of the seventh month every year as the Day of Atonement. They were to bring two goats before the High Priest. . “Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD, and offer it as a sin offering; but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel” (Lev 16,9-10). “When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness” (Lev 16,20-22). The lamb that carried the sins of Israel is a symbol of Jesus who took upon himself the sins of the world and died in atonement for the same, whereas the Lamb whose blood was offered to the

Lord foreshadowed Jesus shedding his blood on the cross for the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God.

In dealing with the symbols and prophecies, one thing has to be kept in mind. The disciples were not trying to show that everything written in the Old Testament were fulfilled in Jesus, but trying to understand what happened to Jesus. In this search they found the OT passages as sign posts and predictions. They were not coming from the OT symbols and predictions to Jesus events, but just the other way. With the words, deeds and life of Jesus in front they went to the OT to find the meaning. They found that everything that happened to Jesus was already indicated in the OT. The incidents in the life of Jesus helped the Apostles to find new meaning in those prophecies. Only after the resurrection and coming of the Holy Spirit did the disciples fully understand the prophecies as well as the life and teachings of Jesus.

PREDICTIONS - INTERPRETATIONS

a. The Predictions of Jesus

As far as Jesus was concerned His passion and death were not accidental events. He knew that it was an inevitable part of his redemptive mission. He tried to make the disciples aware of these bitter facts many times during the second half of his public ministry. Those forewarnings are called Passion Predictions. There are three such predictions in all three Synoptic Gospels.

The first prediction was made immediately after Peter, the leader of the disciples, acknowledged Jesus as Christ and the expected Messiah. “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again”. (Mk 8:31; Mt 16,21; Lk 9,22). Jesus called himself the Son of Man to point out that he was fully human in every sense except sin. Using the phrase “must undergo” he presented it as the plan of God. “He began to teach” implies that it was the beginning of his exhortation about his passion. During the second half of his public ministry Jesus devoted much of his time with the disciples to teach them about his inevitable suffering, death and resurrection.

The second prediction (Mk 9, 31; Mt. 17,22; Lk 9, 44) was rather short, but the last and third one was long and very clear. “Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, “See, we are

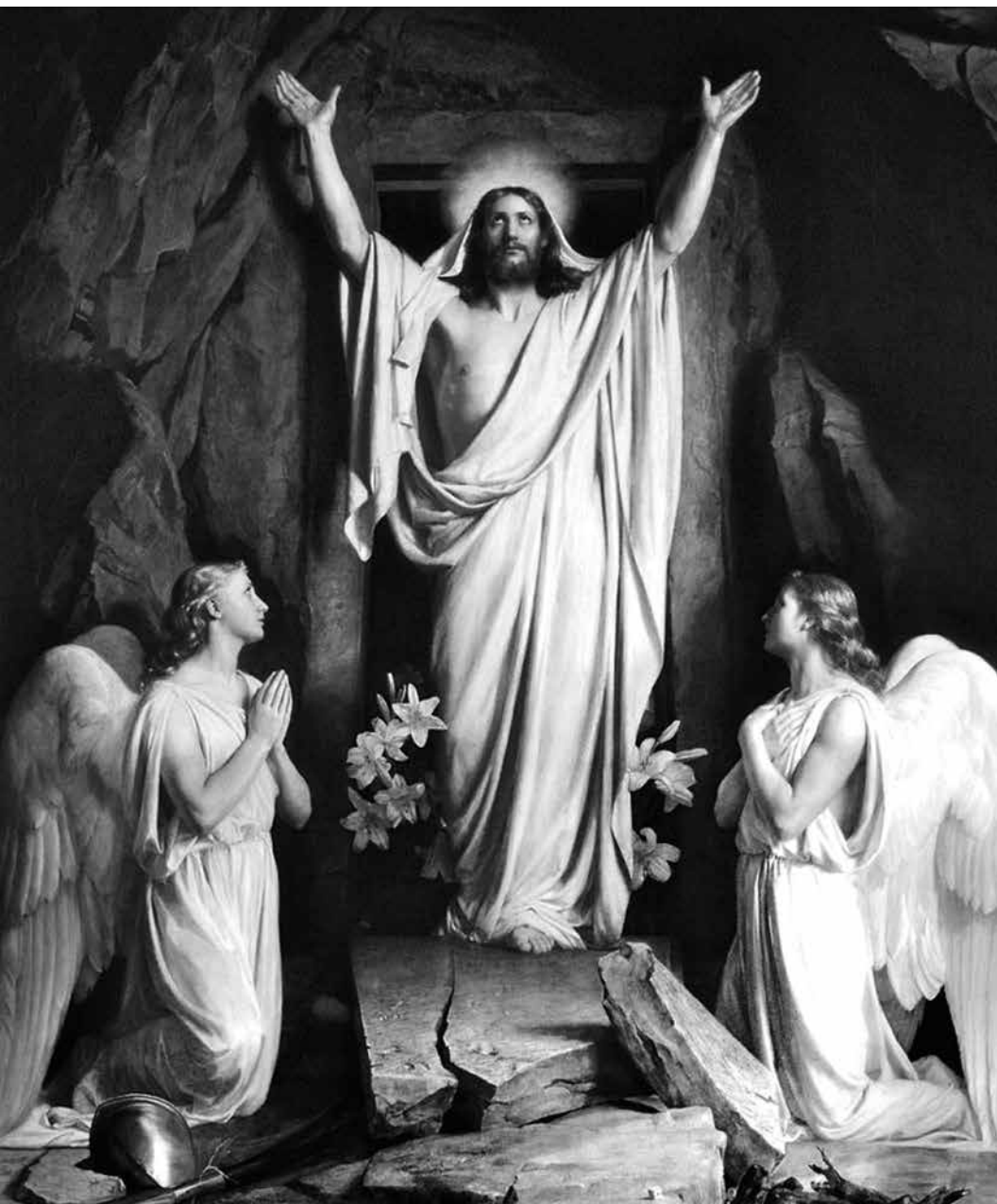


going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again” (Lk 18,31-33; Mt 20,17-19; Mk 10,32-34).

Besides these clear and detailed prophecies, Jesus gave many hints about his suffering, death and resurrection. During the early part of his public life, Jesus told Nicodemus who came to see him one night, “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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” (John 3,13-15). Jesus was referring to his crucifixion as well as glorification when he said about being “lifted up”. “And

I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). Jesus saw his death as a Baptism, “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!” (Luke 12, 50). Reference to baptism reminds the people of Israel crossing the Red Sea. Jesus wanted to convey to the disciples that through death he was leaving this world and going to the Father. Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem’” (Lk 13, 31-33). This passage states clearly that according to the plan of God, Jesus was to die in Jerusalem and no one including Herod can do anything to change it.

The same awareness can be seen in the warning Jesus gave at the Last Supper while talking about the disciple who was to betray him. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born” (Mt 26, 24). The same idea was repeated in Gethsemane when Peter took up the sword against the soldiers who came to arrest Jesus, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?” (Mt 26, 52-54). Jesus continued his teaching about his death and resurrection even after those events took place, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then



he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day" (Lk 24, 44 - 46).

Though such clear warnings were given to them, the disciples could neither understand nor believe that Jesus would suffer and die because they could not envisage the idea of a Saviour who would suffer, die and rise again. It was after the resurrection that the disciples recalled these words and began to comprehend their meaning. From that time on they emphasized the death and resurrection of Jesus whom they proclaimed as the Messiah.

b. In the Primitive Christian Kerygma

In the beginning, the disciples who were Jews proclaimed the Gospel in Jerusalem among the Jews. It was not easy for the Jews to accept Jesus whom they had rejected and crucified. The Apostles who preached to them accentuated the prophecies and symbols from the Old Testament that was sacred to all of them. They proclaimed Jesus as the awaited Messiah and that the Christ event was according to the plan of God. They offered proof for the same quoting from the scriptures that was common to them.

Peter addressing the massive crowd gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, proclaimed: "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power" (Acts 2, 22). Then he quoted the Psalm that highlighted the resurrection of Jesus (Ps. 16, 8 -11; 110, 1). "Now when they

heard this, they were cut to the heart... So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added” (Acts 2, 37-41). The Apostles continued to proclaim the Gospel and persuaded the people, “In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer” (Acts 3:18).

The same teachings were reflected in the proclamation as well as the writings of the other apostles. Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth that Jesus died and was raised from death according to the salvific plan of God. “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15, 3 - 4). Peter said the same in his letter, “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory” (1 Pet 1:10-11).

All these point to one important fact that the death of Jesus was not an unexpected disaster. Though there are historical, social and religious explanations, it was an event beyond all these. It could be understood neither by intellect nor by logic. Ultimately it all happened according to the redemptive plan of God the Father. When viewed in the light of faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus would bear new meaning and understanding. An attempt to see the Christ event in the light of faith is being made in the next chapter.



SELF-SURRENDER OF JESUS

The Christ event, Incarnation of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection were part of the redemptive plan of God who deigned to save the humanity from the grip of sin. The redemption of humanity can be understood only in the light of faith. One can think of the salvific plan of God only when one accepts the fact that man cannot save himself from the dominion of sin. To understand the real nature and meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus, one needs faith.

What is written in the bible regarding the death and resurrection of Jesus can be summarized in the following words. Crucifixion was the voluntary self surrender of Jesus, the son of God incarnate, in order to attain the salvation of humanity by liberating man from the dominion of sin and by reconciling him with God the Father and with one another. In doing this Jesus made them children of God and partakers of Divine life. The Resurrection of Jesus demonstrated beyond doubt that all these were, in principle already accomplished. Now we try to understand the various aspects of Jesus' death in the light of faith.

a. Voluntary Self-Surrender

Looking upon the death of Jesus as explained in the New Testament one can clearly see that Jesus voluntarily accepted it. He was not forced into it either by pressure or by circumstances.

Jesus could have avoided the crucifixion, if he wanted to. This is evident in the command Jesus gave to Peter who took up the sword to defend him (Mt 26, 53). Jesus could as well have requested and received the protection of the army of angels. But, he surrendered himself to the will of the Father and accepted the death on the Cross. The incident at the arrest of Jesus is an evidence for the same. "Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them: "Whom are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground" (Jn 18, 4-6).

From the beginning Jesus knew that he came into this world to be offered as atonement for the sins of the world. He also told the disciples that he came into this world for this very purpose. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mk 10,45). "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father" (Jn 10, 17-18).

The Apostles perceived in the light of faith that the incarnation and crucifixion of the Son of God were part of the self-surrender of Jesus. Paul made this clear in his letter to the Philippians. "Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross" (Phil 2, 5-8). The process of self-emptying that started with the incarnation was completed

as Jesus accepted crucifixion, a mode of punishment reserved for slaves.

Even while teaching that Jesus the Incarnate one is equal to God, the Apostles in no way deny that there is but one God. But, they see a certain plurality within this unity of God. Yahweh believed by the Jews as the only God is in reality the Triune God, the perfect communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It was God the Son himself who became man and was crucified. If incarnation and crucifixion was the manifestation of the self-emptying of the Son, the Resurrection was his exaltation and re-entry into glory.

b. Obedience of the Son

In full freedom, knowledge and awareness Jesus accepted the death on a Cross but at the same time it was an expression of total obedience to the Father. “He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross” (Phil 2, 8). In saying that the Son obeyed the Father, it might appear to question the equality of the son with the Father. It has to be kept in mind that it was the Son who became man who obeyed God the Father.

As a human being Jesus had the temptation to avoid the passion and death. This was manifested the night before his crucifixion, while praying in the garden. He was in such anguish that he sweated blood, which demonstrated the intensity of his internal conflict. It was expressed in his prayer: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground” (Lk 22. 42-44). Like a child crying out to the Father, Jesus prayed addressing the Father with great affection. “Abba,

Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want” (Mk 14, 36).

Jesus experienced intense conflict between the human desire to avoid pain and death and the ultimate will of the Father. This is expressed quite impressively in the letter to the Hebrews. “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb 5, 7-9). It was this cry that came from the Cross. Overcoming this temptation, Jesus surrendered fully to the will of the Father.

There are many prophecies in the Old Testament about this total obedience. “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart” (Ps 40, 7-8; Heb. 10, 7). In the book of Prophet Isaiah, there are references to the Servant of God who voluntarily accepted suffering and death (Is 53, 6. 9-10). In all his predictions about the passion, Jesus made it clear that he was accepting it in obedience to the Father. Phrases like, “have to”, “been sent”, “must” etc. refer to the inevitable will of God. Fulfilling the unchanging will of the Father was as his food, Jesus had said (Jn 4,34).

The fact that God left his only son to suffer and to accept a cruel death at the hands of his enemies might appear strange and even cruel. The Father did not even respond to the son’s desperate cry for help from the cross. What forced the Father to do so? What was the fruit of the Son’s obedience? Further investigation is needed to answer these questions and to understand the meaning of Jesus’ obedience and death.

c. Love Offering

The New Testament presents the passion and death of Jesus as the greatest expression of love. It was the climax of God's love and so also Christ's love, for the humanity. The farewell discourse during the Last Supper manifests this unlimited love of Jesus for the disciples (Jn 14, 16).

The evangelist presents the farewell discourse with the introduction: "Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn 13, 1). Everything that followed demonstrates the deep love Jesus had for his disciples. As a symbol of washing their hearts with his blood, Jesus washed their feet (Jn 13, 4-11). In the form of bread and wine Jesus gave his body as bread and blood as drink. This was the new way he invented to give himself to the disciples and so to us, the humanity. No human being could comprehend the depth of his love.

Jesus who said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15,13) demonstrated that love by offering his own body and blood for the salvation of humanity. Instead of considering the disciples as servants, as was the custom, Jesus raised them to the status of friends. "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (Jn 15,15).

Jesus loved not only the 12 Apostles he chose but every human being, regardless of their condition. His death was the most powerful and definite expression of God's love for humanity. Paul who persecuted the disciples of Jesus came to the awareness of this universal love when he encountered Jesus

on the way to Damascus. His life changed to such a point that he could say, “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” (Gala 2, 20). Each human being can take these words as his own.

Through death, Jesus expressed his love and obedience to the Father as well as his love for humanity. “I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (Jn 14, 31). He also showed us the way to remain in the love of God. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love” (Jn 15, 10). This was not imposed by force but voluntarily accepted out of love.

The death on the cross manifested not only the love of Jesus but also the love of the Father. It was out of love that God created humans in His own image and likeness (Gen 1, 26). When man rejected that love and moved away from God, God did not reject him but promised him salvation. The whole salvation history is the expression of God's merciful love for humanity and sending of His only son is its climax. According to this plan, God gave His only Son to save the humanity.

Love is demonstrated through suffering. God as God could not express his love through suffering. So the only Son of God became man and took upon himself the sins of humanity and through his suffering and death made atonement for it. It was at the same time the supreme expression of the love of the Son as well as the love of the Father who sent him. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3, 16). Here “gave” refers to Crucifixion and “world” refers to every human being, without exception.

Jesus had taught that there is no greater love than offering one's life for the friends. But, the Father's love went one step further by giving His only Son, for those who had turned enemies of God through sin. "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For, while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5, 5-8).



SACRIFICE OF ATONMENT

Throughout the Bible the death of Jesus is presented as a sacrifice in atonement for the sins of the world. To understand this concept, it is important to see how the Bible views sin and sacrifice.

a. Sin

A clear picture of sin emerges from the Bible through its teachings and explanations of historical facts. John in his first letter gives the following brief definition: “Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness” (1 Jn 3,4). God who created man gave the necessary laws to guide him to attain his goal. There are natural laws as well as laws revealed by God in history. Anyone who breaks any of these laws commits sin. Chapters 3 and 4 of the book of Genesis depict the way sin came into the world. “The forbidden fruit eaten by Adam and Eve” is a symbolic presentation. It means that they disobeyed the commandment of God and in doing so damaged the relationship between them and God and consequently between humans as well. As a result of sin man was plagued with fear, shame and guilt. Death became an inevitable part of his life. “Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned” (Rom 5,12).

Humanity inherited a distorted human nature from our first parents. Each person and each generation added their own sins to the original sin. Thus sin multiplied in the world. “They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one” (Ps 14, 3). John asserts that we all are sinners. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1, 8).

Even though sin is defined as breaking of the law, the true nature of sin can be seen only in the context of the wound it inflicted in man’s relation with God. Prophet Isaiah describes sin as follows, “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!” (Is 1, 2- 4). Sin is rejecting God and putting oneself in the place of God. Prophet Jeremiah explained sin as rejecting God and going after futile things. “For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer 2, 13). Through the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus taught that sin is leaving the Father’s house, seeking one’s own selfish comfort (Lk 15, 11-24)

Another definition of sin is that it is the refusal to love and to be loved. By doing so relationships are damaged and each one goes after selfish motives. The self becomes the center of everything. For them only what they want and like are good and acceptable and everything else is considered evil and is rejected. When everybody embraces such a selfish attitude, morality will disappear from the society. Truth and justice will have no place in the value system. Such a state is presented in Chapters 4-6 of

the book of Genesis. The descendants of Adam and Eve, who sinned and were cast out of the paradise, built up a corrupted society. Cain became jealous of his brother and killed him. The earth was soaked with innocent blood. As a consequence of sin, death entered the world and spread from generation to generation.

Cain and Abel are symbolic characters. They represent the entire humanity that is enslaved to sin. "The Lord said to Cain: "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4, 5). Cain stands for all the brothers who refuse to be the keeper of his brother. According to James, evil, selfish thoughts would lead to sin. "One is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death" (Jas 1, 15).

The sacred author has depicted the sinful nature of the world in very clear terms: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Gen 6, 5). Prophet Hosea exposed the various sides of sin, "Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed" (Hosea 4, 1-2). When relationship with God is broken, there will be no concern for the other either. Breaking relationship with God and with the other is sin.

Sin that distorted the image of man has affected all the human beings. Paul succinctly summarized it in these words: "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Rom 7, 19-20).



Sin not only weakened the human nature but also made it deserving punishment. By breaking the law, man invited punishment. “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). When God chose Israel and made a covenant with them, they were warned of punishment if the covenant was broken. “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity” (Deut. 30, 15). Breaking the law of God is breaking the relationship with God and so by that one loses spiritual life. The physical death is the result and visible sign of the punishment.

b. Sacrifice

In order to restore the broken relationship with God and to attain liberation from sin and punishment man has made many efforts such as offering sacrifice and prayers. Sacrifice was considered to be the chief means of reconciliation. Offering a part of what one has is a sign of confessing that everything comes from God as a gift. Almost all the religions in the world have the custom of offering sacrifices to the Deity they believe in. Killing the sacrificial animal, pouring its blood on the altar and burning part of the meat on the altar was considered an effective means of reconciliation. About such sacrifices there are many references in the Bible, especially in the book of Leviticus.

The sinful man offered an animal as sacrifice and believed that the animal took upon itself his sins and so by this sacrifice he was cleansed from his sins. But many were aware that such sacrifices are capable of neither liberating man from sin nor reconciling him with God. Hence, many religions nurtured the hope that God Himself would put on the human form and offer the sacrifice capable of reconciling humanity with God. Many think that such a faith is implied in the Hindu concept

of Prajapathi Yagam spoken of in the Rigveda. In the myth of Prometheus Bound, we see that the Greeks also expected that a god would come to take over the sin of the humanity. Clearer and more detailed indications of this hope can be found in the Old Testament. Psalm 40, 6 -8 and Isaiah 53 are particularly noteworthy.

Prophet Isaiah wrote about a Suffering Servant who would take upon himself the sins of the world and offer himself as a holocaust. “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; ... But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all... although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. ... The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities...yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Is 53, 4-12). This prophetic picture is a clear description of the sacrifice that was fulfilled in Jesus.

c. The Sacrifice of Jesus

It is a running theme in the New Testament that Jesus, the New Adam, by accepting death on a cross, and offering himself as atonement for the sins of humanity, liberated the world that had fallen under the dominion of Satan through the sin of the first parents. The bible depicts Adam as the first sinner and source of all sins. He is presented as the cause of the fall and the representative of the whole humanity fallen under sin. Similarly Jesus who liberated humanity from the dominion of sin through his death and resurrection is called the second or New Adam. Here, Jesus represents humanity and is depicted as the source of salvation for all. Jesus made salvation possible for humanity by

taking upon himself the burden of sin and offering himself as a sacrifice in reparation for the sins of the world. During his life time Jesus tried to impress upon the Apostles that he would have to suffer and die. Although they did not understand it when they were told, after the paschal event, illumined by the Holy Spirit, they explained this truth clearly to all the people.

Jesus was talking about his self sacrifice when he said, “For the Son of Man came ... to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10, 45). “Many” is a common phrase in the local language of the time, Aramaic, and it means all people. The price for liberating is “Ransom” and here it stands for the self sacrifice Jesus was to make. It was by offering himself that Jesus saved the humanity from sin. Peter explained the sacrifice of Jesus in the following terms: “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish” (I Pet 1, 18-19).

At the Last Supper Jesus was offering himself symbolically when he broke and shared the bread and wine. He was establishing a new covenant in the place of the broken covenant of Sinai. Through the covenant of Sinai that was sealed by the blood of oxen, the people of Israel became the People of God. The New Covenant sealed by the blood of Jesus inaugurated the New People of God, the Church.

In Gethsemane, Jesus was deeply distressed and earnestly prayed to take away the cup of suffering but immediately expressed his readiness to surrender to the will of the Father (Mt 26, 39). His agony was so intense that he sweated blood. It was not so much the physical suffering as the sin of humanity that made his condition unbearable. About this agony, Paul said, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5, 21).



As one becomes more aware of the holiness of God, one will become more aware one's own sinful condition. The result of sin is to be cut off from God. Jesus, who remained in intimate relationship with the Father, experienced abandonment because he had taken upon himself the sins of humanity. From the Cross, "Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27, 46). In spite of this utter darkness in the soul, Jesus hung on to his faith that God will not abandon him and as an obedient son, left his life in the father's hands: "Father into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23,46). "Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Gal 1, 3-4).

One may be tempted to ask if there was any need of such a great sacrifice. A brief answer can be found in the following statement of the letter to the Hebrews: "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin" (Heb 9, 22). Disobeying the command of God and putting oneself in the place of God, was the sin of the first parents. Rejection of God is the core of every sin. To irradiate that sin "man" has to accept God as his Lord. For this, one's ego has to die. People of almost all religions tried to accomplish expiation by sacrificing animals and pouring out blood on altars, but all in vain. A sinful man cannot accomplish this complete self-surrender that would lead to expiation of sins and reconciliation with God. Hence in the fullness of time, God became man and offered himself in reparation for the sins of the world. He is at the same time the priest who offers and the victim offered. The letter to the Hebrews deals with it in detail, especially in Chapters 8, 9 and 10.

Paul has stated many times that Jesus offered his life to save us. Here are just two examples, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and man ...Christ Jesus, himself

human, who gave himself a ransom for all- this was attested at the right time” (1 Tim 2, 5-6). “He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (Tit 2,14). It is clear beyond doubt that Jesus sacrificed himself to save the humanity. Now let us see what happened to the world with this great sacrifice and what the fruits of that great sacrifice are.

d. Fruits of Jesus’ Sacrifice

Suffering untold pain Jesus died on the Cross and offered his life into the hands of the Father who accepted the offering and raised him from the dead. The glory he had set aside while becoming man was restored to him. “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2, 36). “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name” (Phil 2, 9). After the resurrection Jesus appeared to the disciples before ascending into heaven. “So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God” (Mk 16, 19). Jesus expressed this glorification in the following words, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28, 18).

It was the son of God who became man that re-entered heaven in full glory and with this human nature itself was renewed and glorified. Sin had created a gap between God and man and it was bridged through Jesus Christ. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5, 1). Humanity was freed from the slavery of sin and the dominion of evil. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us” (Eph

1, 7). “When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col 2, 12). What was impossible for the blood of oxen and goats was accomplished by the blood of Christ. “If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7) “And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10, 10).

By his death and resurrection, Jesus achieved victory over death that came into the world through sin and thus eternal life was made available for humanity. Death has no longer the final word. Though man dies physically, his immortal soul lives in the hope of resurrection. Jesus has said: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day” (Jn 6, 54); “Jesus said to Martha,... “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (Jn 11,25). “Through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died” (1 Thess 4, 14). “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more” (Rev 21, 4). In the first letter of Peter we read: “By his great mercy, we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unending, kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 3-4). “As it is written, what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2, 9).

“Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear”(Acts 2.33). During his life on earth Jesus had promised: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever”(Jn

14,16; Lk 11,13) and “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (Jn 16,13). Jesus also said that the Holy Spirit will come only after his glorification (Jn 7, 37-39). It is the spirit of the glorified Christ that constantly renews and makes us children of God. “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8, 15 - 16).

Being washed in the blood of Christ, we have become the children of God. “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7, 14); “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Eph 2,19). Through His death and resurrection Jesus liberated us from the dominion of sin and formed us into the family of the children of God.

From the Cross Jesus attracted all the people to him. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12, 32). In this new family all are equal. “We are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3, 25 – 29). The Church became the mystical body of Christ. “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Rom 12, 4-5). He

has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church (Eph 1, 22; 2, 16; 4,15; 1 Cor 12,13).

The human nature that was distorted by the disobedience of the first parents was reformed by the obedience of Jesus unto death on the Cross. The broken relationships were re-established. All that was lost was restored and elevated. Jesus became the source of divine life for all by being the Way, Truth and the source of Divine Life for all. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4, 12).

What Jesus Christ achieved for all through his death and resurrection has to be appropriated by each one personally. To do so one has to believe in Him and follow his teachings in life. "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart, because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved" (Rom 10, 8-10). Our confession of faith should not be mere lip service but it must be confirmed through a life conformable to the faith we confess.



PART - II

GOSPEL FROM
THE CROSS

CRY FROM THE CROSS

“Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he cried out and breathed his last, said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

(Mk. 15, 37–39).

The Confession of the Centurion is quite unexpected, and paradoxical. The context hardly justifies it. In all appearance Jesus was a criminal, accused of high treason against the Roman Empire, and condemned to die on the cross. Crucifixion was the most painful and humiliating punishment, meted out to runaway slaves and revolutionaries. This particular centurion was entrusted with the task of executing the sentence on Jesus. It is certainly surprising and unbelievable that the executioner himself announces that the criminal he crucified is the Son of God.

Only the gospel of Mark reports such a confession of the centurion. The other synoptic gospels also report a similar confession, but on closer examination we see significant differences as well. In the gospel of Mathew, not only the centurion but also those with him make the confession. The reason for their confession is not so much the death itself, but the extraordinary phenomena that accompanied the death (Mt 27, 51-54). In the gospel of Luke it is the centurion who makes the confession, but the confession itself as well as the reason for the confession is again different. The centurion acknowledges

Jesus' innocence, and the reason for this declaration is the unusual happenings (Lk 23, 44-47).

In the gospel of Mark the centurion's confession is motivated by just one factor: he saw how Jesus died. In comparison with the other Synoptic Gospels, only seldom does Mark present Jesus as the Son of God. He begins the gospel with the statement: "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk 1, 1). Then at the Baptism as well as at the transfiguration God the Father proclaims Jesus as His beloved son: "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you" (Mk. 1, 11); "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him" (Mk. 9, 7). Mark tells us that the devil and demons also recognized Jesus and cried out: "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God... he



also drove out many devils, but he would not allow them to speak, because they knew who he was” (Mk 1, 25 – 34). Besides these, the only time Mark presents Jesus as the Son of God is the one under discussion: through the mouth of the centurion, at the time Jesus died on the Cross. By doing so, it is evident that the evangelist gives great importance to this confession.

The title of dignity, Son of God, attributed to Jesus, is essential to the very structure, holding the gospel of Mark together. At the beginning the evangelist himself makes the declaration; then at the beginning of the public ministry and at the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem, the journey to death, God the Father acknowledges Jesus as His only beloved Son. Satan recognized him and acknowledged defeat. The only human being proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God is the centurion, a gentile, a high ranking Roman official, who supervised the execution of the sentence. This takes place at the end of the gospel, almost as a conclusion. This appears to be a great contradiction and at the same time a great revelation.

The evangelist points out two factors that led the centurion to make the confession: 1) he stood at the foot of the cross, facing Jesus on the cross; and 2) he saw him dying thus. The two words “stood” and “saw, conceal a whole world of teaching about discipleship.

The disciple, according to Mark, is the one, who is called to stand at the foot of the cross, facing Jesus and seeing him die. This teaching is given throughout this gospel. The first thing Jesus did after the public declaration of the Father at Jordan and defeat of Satan in the wilderness, was calling the disciples (Mk.1, 16-20). After that, only in the presence of the disciples did Jesus teach or perform miracles. It was for this, to be with him at all times, that Jesus called the disciples. The place of a disciple is with his Master. He must follow him and participate

in his vision, mission and experiences. Jesus had taught them that following him implies taking up one's cross, and walking behind him to Calvary: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me" (Mk. 8, 34).

This kind of discipleship is the fundamental requirement for any one to know and follow Jesus. Seeing the miracles he performed, many had acknowledged him as the Messiah, the Christ. But, Jesus does not accept or encourage such a confession. Besides, after performing miracles Jesus strictly commanded them not to publicize the incident since it would create more harm than good, because such confessions involve much misunderstanding about the person and the nature of the Messiah "Mind you tell no one anything" (Mk 1, 44). Neither does Jesus accept the declaration by the Satan. When Peter, as the spokesman of the apostles, proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah, he and the whole college of apostles were instructed not to tell it to anyone: "And he gave them strict orders not to tell anyone about him "(Mk 8, 30). This is what is known as the Messianic Secret in the gospel of Mark. This command to secrecy had a definite purpose and limit in the Markan narrative.

While descending from the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus clarified the purpose and meaning of the Messianic Secret. "As they were coming down from the mountain he warned them to tell no one what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead" (Mk. 9, 9). The Divine Son-ship of Jesus is a truth to be proclaimed only after the death and resurrection. The true identity of Jesus will be revealed only through his passion, death and resurrection. To know Jesus, to believe in him and to proclaim that faith, one has to follow him to the foot of the Cross and become a witness to the way he died.

Without such a discipleship and witnessing, a confession of faith would be not only empty and meaningless but even harmful. Satan recognized Jesus as the Son of the Most High and announced it publicly but it did not bring him salvation. Jesus knew that such publicity would help only to create more misunderstanding. The people had been waiting for a Messiah who would free the nation from foreign rule and establish a mighty empire. There was the danger that an improper publicity would encourage people to see him as the liberator, the political Messiah of the popular expectation. This was not just a vague possibility; it did happen in fact as is reported by the fourth evangelist: “When the people saw the signs that he had done, they began to say: This is indeed the prophet who is to come into this world. When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (6, 14-15). From this context not only the purpose of the Messianic secret but also the intimate relation between Jesus’ Divine Son-ship and discipleship become evident.

The gospel of Mark describes how miserably all the disciples failed in their call to follow the suffering Son of Man on the way of the cross and to stand at the foot of his cross. Instead of following the suffering Son of Man to the bitter end they tried to persuade him to turn away from the path of the Cross (Mk. 8, 32). When Jesus was teaching them about his passion and death, they were arguing about power and position (Mk. 9, 34; 10, 37). Of the twelve specially chosen, one became a traitor and at the critical moment, others ran away (Mk. 14, 45. 50). Upon questioning, the leader of the gang denied him not once but three times (Mk. 14, 71). Where the chosen apostles failed, a Roman centurion, a gentile is depicted as the model of a true disciple. He stood at the foot of the Cross and declared “In truth this man was Son of God” (Mk. 15, 39).

The centurion did not carry the cross and follow Jesus. He neither heard his teachings nor saw the miracles he performed. What enabled him to become such an ideal of discipleship is none other than witnessing the way Jesus died (Mk. 15, 39). He had seen many people die on the cross. Could a criminal's cry, at the moment of his death, suffice to lead an experienced Roman executioner to such a faith? Mathew and Luke felt that it was not enough and so they described other events that took place at the moment Jesus died. But Mark concentrates on just one point: the way he died (Mk 15, 39). What was so striking about that death?

In narrating the passion and death of Jesus all the four evangelists agree in the general outline of the events, whereas we notice great differences in details as well as orientation and interpretation. John presents crucifixion as the glorification of Christ. This becomes evident from the use of the word "exalt". Jesus is exalted or raised on the cross (Jn 3, 15; 8, 28; 12, 32). All through the passion, the fourth evangelist emphasizes the aspect of glorification and kingship of Jesus. Hence in that gospel there is no cry from the Cross. The institution of the Church (Jn 19,26-2, gift of the Holy Spirit (19,33) and fulfilling the will of God (19,19,28-29) are the themes emphasized by John.

In the Gospel of Luke, importance is given to the forgiving love of Jesus (Lk 23,34), his unending mercy (Lk 23,28-31) and salvation for all. The repentant thief and the centurion are presented as examples of salvation to the gentiles and sinners (23, 42 - 43. 23, 47). Death of Jesus is depicted as the martyrdom of the prophet as well as a loving surrender of life into the hands of the Father. The innocence of Jesus is given great emphasis (23, 4. 14-18.47). Mathew presents the death of Jesus as an eschatological event, with apocalyptic signs such as earth quake, darkness all over the land at midday, the Sanctuary veil torn

in two from top to bottom, tombs opened and dead rising (Mt 27,51-55). It marked the end of the old age and the beginning of the new age of salvation.

The presentation of Mark is totally different from all these. In the second gospel Jesus is the Son of God and Christ who took upon himself the sins and sufferings of the entire humanity and entered into glory through his passion, death on the Cross and the resurrection. His divinity was revealed through his suffering and helplessness on the cross. In Mark, the emphasis falls on the aspect of the Christ who was misunderstood and rejected, and so becomes a model for the Christians who were undergoing persecution. This general understanding of the messiah is more evident in the description of the passion and death.



Mark has presented two cries of Jesus from the Cross. The first one was an articulate cry of prayer: "At the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15, 34). Mathew also has reported this cry. In Mark the cry is addressed to Eloi, while in Mathew it is addressed to Eli. Both words mean "My God". It can also be taken as an abbreviation of the name "Elijahu" which is the same as "Elijah". Those who stood around the cross thought that Jesus was calling the prophet Elijah because there was a popular belief that Elijah would come when the innocent calls out in mortal danger.

In fact, Jesus was praying Psalm 22, the first verse being said aloud. The Psalm is often characterized as a prayer of the forsaken, and so the cry is often interpreted as a cry of despair. But on closer examination we can see that the psalm is not a cry of the desperate, but a prayer of confidence uttered by a person in extreme danger and pain. It expresses not hopelessness, but a confession of faith and confidence of the one who anchors his hope in God. Hence, Jesus by praying this psalm, manifested great hope and trust in God, even in the midst of untold pain. Luke did not take up this cry, but has another prayer: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk. 23, 46). Here also it is not a cry of despair but of hope and self-surrender.

The second cry, reported by Mark and Mathew at the moment of Jesus' death differs from this first cry of prayer. It is an inarticulate cry: "Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last" (Mk. 15, 37; Mt 27, 50). In fact the original Greek word, though often translated as cry is not exactly that. "Cried aloud" is an interpretation. Considering against the background of the first cry, the second cry could be a more ardent and pathetic lament. But, the literal meaning of the original word used in the second cry is: "giving out a loud voice". Very often this is translated as

a “loud cry”. However a cry does not have to be necessarily a mourning or lament. It could also mean “shouting”. This raises two questions. (1) What did the evangelist mean by this loud voice? (2) How did this become a sign for the centurion?

It was not the first time that the centurion witnessed a crucifixion. Hence, there was something different here. The man’s body was all torn by scourging. He had been hanging on the nails for hours. His body was drained of blood; mouth dried; throat parched and the tongue stuck to the pallet. To breathe, he had to raise himself on his legs nailed to the cross. Usually people who hung on the cross died of suffocation. The maximum sound one could produce would be an inaudibly smothered groan.

It is against this background that we have to understand the loud voice from Jesus on the Cross. It convinced the centurion that the one hanging on the cross was not a criminal; not even a mere man. Only one with supernatural power could produce such a voice. It was that loud cry that was so particular about Jesus’ death. It was so special that the centurion could not help but proclaim that Jesus was the Son of God. Where all found failure, helplessness and despair, Mark discerned power and victory. This was the true meaning of Jesus’ death on the Cross. This is what the apostles realized later and proclaimed.

The loud cry had another meaning as well. It is not the cry of the defeated but the jubilant shouting of the winner, the one who defeated the enemy in the definitive battle, one who won the race, one who accomplished the humanly impossible task entrusted to him. There is no sadness, no despair, no disappointment, but only the joy of having completed his mission of salvation, having fulfilled the will of the Father to the end, having defeated Satan who reigned in sin and death and redeemed humanity from the clutches of Evil. The loud cry from the cross is the

shout of triumph, announcing the victory of God over all the powers of evil. The shout of victory reverberated to the ends of the earth, and in the apocalyptic language used by Mathew, the earth shook, rocks split, sun faltered from its course, darkness spread over the land, and the dead were startled out of their sleep in the graves.

The centurion recognized the cry from the cross as the mighty voice of God, “the voice that thunders over mighty waters, that breaks the cedars of Lebanon, that shakes the wilderness, and strips the forest bare” (Ps 29, 3-9). It was the shout of God who came down to execute justice, pulling down the thrones established in violence and injustice, uprooting the culture of death and protecting life. Thus, the one who was appointed as the executioner by the Roman Empire became the disciple and apostle of the Good News, the first witness to Jesus’ triumph over sin and death.

Hence it is not surprising that the original gospel of Mark does not report any resurrection appearance. It is generally agreed among bible scholars that the original gospel of Mark ended at 16, 8. The death with the triumphant shout is the climax of the Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God, who lived and died as the Son of Man. Like the Centurion, may we receive the grace and have the courage to stand at the foot of the Cross, hear the cry of triumph and proclaim to the World that Jesus is our Lord and God.



FATHER, FORGIVE

“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Lk 23, 34).

The Gospels have recorded seven words Jesus uttered from the Cross. As a rule the last words of a person are considered to be the most important and final wish or testament. They will be the most important words of that person’s life. These parting gifts are meant to be remembered and diligently executed by the followers. The Cross raised on top of the world became a pulpit from which the most important sermon was preached by Jesus. Mount Sinai and the Mount of Beatitudes point to the mountain called Calvary in Latin, Golgoltha in Hebrew and Cranion in Greek. The meaning of the word in all three languages is “skull”. This name hints at the fact that the Cross was raised on of the summit, head, of the earth. It would also suggest that the blood that was poured out from the Cross washed the entire world.

The words from the Cross are recorded in the four Gospels with considerable variations. Mathew and Mark have recorded only one saying. This saying is not found in Luke or John; but they have recorded three other sayings each. Thus all together we have “seven words from the Cross” which can be considered as the sum and substance of the teaching of Jesus. In the Bible “seven” stands for completeness. We do not know which of these sayings was uttered first and which last. Understanding the meaning of these words is more important than deciding their chronological order. In presenting the words, we are following a generally accepted order.

Luke has recorded three words from the cross, of which the first and the last are addressed to the Father, whereas the second one is a pledge given to a dying man. Here we are discussing the first of these words. It is presented immediately after reporting that they crucified him between two criminals (Lk 23, 33). The last word was uttered right before his death. Presenting these words as prayers addressed to the Father, Luke has depicted the death on the cross as a prayer. It is the prayer of the Eternal High Priest, who offered his own life as a sacrifice to the Father.

It would appear that for Luke the entire life of Jesus was a continuous prayer. In preparation for the public life, Jesus was anointed while he was immersed in prayer after the Baptism (Lk 3, 21). Before making any important decision, Jesus prayed (Lk 6, 12; 9, 18 – 28). In the beginning of the passion we see Jesus getting lost in intense prayer: “In his anguish he prayed even more earnestly” (Lk 22, 44).

Crucified victims would be suffering intense pain and so, normally they would be uttering cries and pouring out curses on everybody. They even spat upon those who were standing around. In order to silence them the executioners sometimes cut off their tongues. But what a difference in Jesus! No hatred, no curse, no fury. His thoughts are all centered on the Father and on the ones who crucified him. With great love and affection he turns to God addressing Him “Abba, Father”, who is the center of his life. Even in the midst of excruciating pain, his mind is calm. In ardent prayer, he said, “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23, 34). How merciful he was to his enemies, who rejected him, insulted him and crucified him! He was practicing what he taught, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly” (Lk. 6, 27-28).

“Forgive them”. Whom did he mean by this? For whom was he praying? He was praying not only for those who crucified him and stood around the cross, insulting him but also for all those who need God’s forgiveness, the entire humanity. Jesus even finds justification for this forgiveness: “they do not know what they do”. In the original, Greek, there is one more word “gar” which means “for” or “because” which is often left out in the translations, may be because the meaning is obvious. However, the preposition emphasizes that his request was supported by an explanation. “The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of world”, offered this priestly prayer while giving his own life as a sacrifice in atonement for the sins of the world (Heb 9, 12-15; 10, 10). No one is excluded from this intercessory prayer.

The excuse “they do not know” might appear to be rather weak and contrary to facts. Can we say that the soldiers who crucified him, the people who insulted him, the High Priest and Sanhedrin that handed him over to be killed, Pilate who washed his hands off the crime (Mt. 27, 24) and the people who complied with all these, did it all without knowing? The Gospels have clearly stated that the Jewish leadership handed him over because of jealousy (Mt 27, 18; Mk 15, 10). The crowd shouted that they would take upon themselves the responsibility for his blood (Mt 27, 25). How can then one say that they did not know what they were doing? Yes, Jesus is TRUTH itself and does not say anything that he does not really mean. Hence, a deeper analysis is called for to find out the truth hidden in this statement of Jesus.

As Jesus said, none of them knew the enormity, horror and significance of their crime. With their limited knowledge of monotheism, the Jewish leaders could not accept Jesus as the Son of God. They saw him only as a blasphemer and false prophet who distorted their faith. They did not know that the

one they were accusing of blasphemy was himself God. None of them knew that they were killing the Lord of life. None of them knew their folly. The bible repeatedly makes it clear that it was ignorance that led to the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus (Acts 3, 17; 13, 27).

It is still happening. If the true nature and gravity of sin were really known, no one would commit a sin. Jesus warned the disciples, “indeed the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is doing a holy service to God” (Jn 16, 2). Religious fanatics who try to eliminate the people of other faith, terrorists who consider all others enemies to be destroyed, political and cultural leaders who propagate atheism and immorality, do not know the full implication of their actions. People are not really aware of the far reaching consequences of abortion, mercy killing and all sorts of crime against life. One fails to understand that the people whom one ignores, insults, exploits and oppresses, are children of God, created in His own image and likeness and consequently one’s own brothers and sisters.

The prayer of Jesus gives us hope, but it should not be a pretext to persist in our ignorance. Moreover, we should also be able to pray as Jesus prayed. We must believe that those who hurt, oppose, reject and try to destroy us, only do so, because they do not really know what they are doing and so pray to the Father to forgive them. The uniqueness of a Christian becomes manifest in forgiving without reserve, loving the enemy, blessing those who curse and praying for those who abuse us (Lk 6,27). This was the lesson Jesus imparted from the cross. Stephen the first Christian martyr had imbibed this spirit. That is why he could pay for those who stoned him: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts. 7, 60).

The statement of Jesus that “they do not know what they are doing” seems to refer not only to their sins but also to the place they have within the whole salvific plan of God. Without being aware of it, they were also working for the fulfillment of God’s plan of redemption. Everything that happens has a place in the divine plan. Pharaoh’s hardening of heart and Judas’ betrayal of Jesus have their role in this plan. Joseph pointed this out to his brothers, when he said, “I am your brother Joseph whom you sold into Egypt... since God sent me before you to preserve your lives” (Gen 45, 4-5). This does not absolve one from the responsibility of one’s actions but helps to accept all that happens as part of God’s plan. This knowledge would save us from falling into despair over our past sins. Even our sins have a place in God’s plan. Sometimes God might use others to cause us suffering, to execute His plan for us. Hence, we must believe that there is a positive value for everything that happens in our lives. Even the ill treatment and hurt we receive from others have their role in purifying us. Nothing happens without the knowledge and permission of God. This conviction would help us not to judge others but to trust in God who makes everything to work out for good (Rom 8, 28).



TODAY IN PARADISE

“Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23,43).

He was a criminal, condemned to death. His simple and cautiously placed request was answered with a promise that surpassed all his expectations and dreams. The evangelist Luke does not say what crime that man had committed but the circumstances point to the fact that he and his companion, crucified on either side of Jesus, were zealots like Barabbas.

Palestine was a land occupied and ruled by the Romans. People resented the colonial rule and waited for the Messiah to come and liberate the land from the Romans. There were some among the people of the land who thought they could throw the Romans out through the use of weapons. For that they prepared themselves, forming a kind of liberation movement. They were called Zealots and often conducted guerrilla model attacks on detachments of Roman soldiers. Zealots were present all over the land, but were more concentrated in Galilee. Hence it is quite probable that the two criminals belonged to the Zealot movement. It would seem that Pilate, the Roman procurator considered Jesus as a leader of the zealots and condemned him to death. The insults, taunts and challenges hurled at Jesus by those who stood around the cross seem to derive from this understanding, that Jesus was a Zealot leader who tried to liberate the people from the Romans.

Both Mathew and Mark report that the Jewish leaders, soldiers, passersby and even those two crucified with Jesus

insulted and challenged him to come down from the cross. But Luke presents a solitary voice that differed from the cry of the mob. “One of the criminals hanging there abused him: ... But the other spoke up for Jesus and rebuked him saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly; for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong” (Lk 23, 39 -41). This man was aware of his guilt and accepted the punishment. He seems to have been aware of a life after death and so asked for mercy from Jesus. After proclaiming that Jesus did nothing wrong, he pleaded, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”(Lk 23,42).

This prayer stands in direct contradiction to the context. It is similar to the Centurion’s confession in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus did not accept the challenge and come down from the Cross. In all appearance he was just a condemned criminal like any other, dying on the cross. There was no external sign to evoke such a faith and prayer. Yet this man not only confessed Jesus as Christ and Savior, but also proclaimed the faith that he would come back as king and judge. This faith leads him to the prayer for mercy. According to the belief prevalent among the Jews of the time, the Kingdom of God would arrive at the end of the present age, when the Messiah would come as the Son of Man and the Judge. This hope is based on many a prophecy in the OT, especially Dan 7, 13-14. While the Jewish leadership rejected him and the disciples ran away, this crucified criminal acknowledged and proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ.

His prayer was heard immediately. “In truth I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk. 23, 42- 43). What is presented here is an irrevocable promise from God. The introduction **“in truth”** implies divine authority. All the evangelists use this expression to emphasize that Jesus was

speaking with the same authority as God. Jesus accepts the implicit confession of faith and reveals himself to the one who believed and prayed. All the three words of Jesus' promise deserve special attention.

1. Paradise: The man requested Jesus to remember him when he comes into his Kingdom. In his response Jesus identifies his kingdom with Paradise. The English word “paradise” comes from the Persian word “Pairidaeza”. Without much variation, the same word is used in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. The Persian word pointed to a pleasure garden secured with compound walls, especially the royal gardens. In the book of Genesis the place where God settled the first man and his wife is called “gan” in Hebrew, meaning a garden. The Septuagint translated the Hebrew gan into “Paradeisos”. It is from here that we have the concept of paradise. Paradise came to be understood as a place of happiness, where nothing would be lacking. In fact what lies behind the Genesis account of paradise is a state of being rather than a geographical location. It points to the life with God, the source of life and all happiness.

Until they ate the forbidden fruit man and his wife were with God in paradise. It was only when they broke the commandment of God that they became afraid of God, tried to hide and finally were cast out of the paradise. There was a common belief in Israel that humanity would get this paradise back at the end of times. The promise of Jesus has to be understood against this background. What the petitioner described as Thy Kingdom, Jesus interprets as Paradise. What the repentant criminal is promised is the lost paradise which all the people were waiting for.

2. With me: Jesus himself explains what paradise means. It is a state of being rather than a place. With death, man goes beyond

the limitation of space and time. There are only two possibilities after death: either being with God or being away from God. The state of being away from God is “hell” and being with God is “heaven” or “paradise”. That is what Jesus promises: you will be with me in paradise. Being with Jesus is the same as being with God. Man was created to be with God and being in paradise would refer to attaining this goal of being with God for all eternity. This is the ultimate goal and greatest thirst of every soul. Paul expressed it when he said, “my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil 1, 23).

3. Today: The Jews believed that the establishment of the Kingdom of God, the coming of Christ in glory, and the Last Judgment would take place at the end of the world. This common belief was reflected in the prayer of the “good thief”. But Jesus’ response radically changes this perspective. There is no need to wait till the end of the world to attain salvation and to experience the Kingdom. It is already present, here and now. The repentant criminal is promised immediate entry into heaven.

From the fact that Jesus offered heaven to a condemned criminal, turning to God just before his death, we can draw some important conclusions: (1) As long as one is alive on this earth, one can repent. God gives us time to repent till the last moment of our life. (2) Anyone who turns to Christ with faith will not be abandoned, nor will he be cross examined for his past sins. Jesus had taught this through various examples and parables. The same teaching was reconfirmed from the Cross. (3) “Today” is the moment one turns to the Lord with whole heart. The moment we open our hearts to receive Him, we can experience salvation and that is the experience of Paradise. (4) It is Jesus who overcame death by his own death, who offers the

Paradise. The prayer of the repentant criminal and the response of Jesus can be considered as a source of hope and a model to imitate for anyone who believes in Christ. The earnest hope of every Christian is hearing these words from Jesus at the moment of death: “today you will be with me in paradise”.

There are many apocryphal stories explaining the last minute repentance and salvation of one of the men crucified with Jesus. The stories depict them as bandit chieftains, zealot leaders, robbers etc. The one who was saved is called Deemas in some stories; others call him Demas or Dumacus. One of the most popular stories is related to the infancy of Jesus. The Holy Family, fleeing from Herod’s soldiers, fell in the hands of robbers. When they were about to kill all the three of them, the son of the leader of the band, who was just a young boy, felt compassion for the child and pleaded with his father to spare their lives. As they were taking leave, the boy addressed a request to the baby: “Oh blessed child, if I ever happen to plea for your mercy, please do not forget this moment”. Though the story might have been formulated in view of the prayer from the Cross, it is nevertheless, meaningful and inspiring.

This story might be an answer to the question why only one thief was given the grace to repent and to be saved while both men had committed similar crimes. The explanation of the Bible might be that only one of them was daring to believe in Jesus and prayed to him (Heb. 11, 6). Faith opens new horizons and provides new insights. It is faith that raises us above this world and takes us to a life beyond death. Only faith will enable one to acknowledge Jesus who died on the Cross as the Lord of Life and open one’s heart to receive the salvation he offers.



BEHOLD YOUR SON

“Seeing his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother, “Woman, behold your son”. Then to the disciple he said, “Behold your mother”. And from that hour the disciple took her into his home” (Jn 19, 26-27).

It would seem that Jesus, before his death, is taking care of the future of his widowed mother by entrusting her to the protection of his beloved disciple. That is how many preachers interpret this passage. Others would take this episode as an evidence to prove that Mary did not have any children other than Jesus. Both may be true, but are these the main points made by the evangelist? John, we know, is very meticulous in the use of words and choice of episodes in the gospel. The words and events in this gospel have a deeper level of meaning that may not be apparent at first sight. That the present episode is no exception to this general norm will become evident if we analyze its position in the gospel as well as the words used.

John presents this as the last act of Jesus during his earthly life. The statement that follows this episode: “After this, Jesus knew that everything had now been completed” (Jn. 19, 28) points to its importance. With this final act, Jesus completed the salvific mission the Father had entrusted to him. A structural analysis of the crucifixion narrative will reveal the importance the evangelist gives to the episode under consideration.

From the crucifixion to the burial of Jesus the narrative is divided into seven episodes.

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|---|--------------------|
| 1. Jesus is being nailed to the cross | 19, 17 - 19 |
| 2. The inscription on the cross | 19, 20 – 21 |
| 3. The garment, woven in one piece | 19, 23 - 24 |
| 4. Mother and son | 19, 25 – 27 |
| 5. Thirst, total surrender | 19, 28 – 30 |
| 6. Blood & water flowed out of the pierced side | 19, 31 – 37 |
| 7. Burial of the body | 19, 38 – 42 |

The episode that deals with the “mother and son” stands at the center of the narrative.

“Woman”. The importance of this event is emphasized not only by the structure but also by the matter presented. In the Gospel of John, Mary appears only twice, namely at the beginning and at the end of the public ministry of Jesus. It is at Cana that Mary appears for the first time. There she becomes instrumental to the beginning of Jesus’ journey that would lead him to the exaltation on the cross. Though he said, “My hour has not yet come” (Jn. 2, 4), he did give them wine and thus performed “the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory” (Jn 2,11). The “hour” mentioned in Cana pointed to the hour of glorification through the death on the cross. What was begun in Cana was completed on Calvary. It is there that Mary appears for the second and last time in the gospel of John. Thus the presence of Mary with Jesus is essentially linked to the mystery of redemption and at both instances Jesus addressed her “woman”. Hence there is no doubt about the deeper meaning and implication of this event. But, what exactly is this deeper meaning?

While dealing with the miracle at Cana, we saw that Jesus by addressing his mother “woman” was referring to the first

prophecy of salvation: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel” (Gen. 3, 15). This prophecy was fulfilled on Calvary. The cross that was raised on top of the earth (Calvary = skull) crushed the head of Satan, the power of evil that tempted the first woman and caused the fall of humanity. The son of the woman, the Messiah, died on the cross, fulfilling the prophecy.

It was to underscore her role in the fulfillment of the prophecy that Jesus called his mother “Woman”. Thereby Jesus raised her to a position far beyond that of blood relationship. She is the new Eve, who closely collaborated with the New Adam in the redemption of humanity from slavery to sin and Satan. The First Eve, who is described as “the mother of all who live” (Gen 3,20) gave birth to children who are subject to death while the New Eve became the mother of all who are born to eternal life.

“Behold, your son”. Who is this son? It is obvious that it refers to the disciple who stood at the foot of the cross. In that sense many would argue that Jesus was ensuring the protection of his mother. But who is he? The Evangelist does not mention the name of the disciple. Tradition states that it was John, son of Zebedee. But, the Evangelist simply calls him “the disciple whom he loved”. Why did Jesus avoid calling him by name? Why does the evangelist give him no name? There might be a similar reason here as for calling his mother “woman”.

Addressing the disciple “John” would have limited it to a historical person, an individual. The term “disciple whom he loved” has a deeper meaning and symbolic value. He stands as symbol and representative of all the disciples whom Jesus loves. A new family is being formed here through the statement: “Woman, behold, your son” and “Behold, your mother”. This family is rooted not in blood relationship but in faith in Christ

and in obedience to the will of the Heavenly Father. The mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple belong to that family as mother and son. Thus, Mary the mother of Jesus becomes the mother of the Church and the members of the Church her sons and daughters.

Paul depicts the Church as the mystical body of Christ (Col 1, 18). In Bethlehem Mary gave birth to Jesus, the head of the mystical body. On Calvary she becomes the mother of his body, the Church. (Calvary is only 7 km away from Bethlehem!) Luke says, “She gave birth to her firstborn son” (Lk. 2, 6). Firstborn could point to other children. It became a reality on Calvary as she became the mother of numerous children, the Church, in a spiritual way. This is not an invention of the Catholic Church but a truth revealed by Jesus and reported by the evangelist.

The Evangelist John has also recorded the response of the disciple. “And from that hour the disciple took her into his home” (Jn 19, 27). Some interpreters think that John had a house in Jerusalem and took her there immediately, even before Jesus died. This obviously is an exaggeration that misses the point. In this statement two things deserve special attention – “from that hour” and “his home”.

“From that hour” This indicates a new beginning. “Hour” has a special theological implication for John. First of all, the hour indicates the glorification of Christ through his death. In the present context it points also to the birth of the Church. The Church is born when Jesus is exalted on the cross, or glorified through his death.

“His home” This does not refer to a material building. The original word used in Greek is “Ta Idia” meaning “his own”. This expression points to a relationship that goes beyond the four walls of a house. The disciple accepted her as his own, as part of his family. Since “the disciple Jesus loved” stands as the



representative of the Church, receiving the mother of Jesus as his own would imply that she is accepted as the mother of the Church. The declaration of the Master and the act of the disciple reveal the beginning of the Church as the family of Jesus. This was Jesus' last wish and his last act before death, namely, establishing his Church as a family with his mother as the mother of the Church and the church as her children. Immediately after this Jesus said: "It is finished" (Jn. 19, 30).

The fact that Jesus gave his mother as the mother of the Church and all the members became her children does not mean

that she is not a member of the Church. Just as all other human beings, Mary also had to be saved. The only difference is that in view of her divine motherhood she was preserved from original sin by virtue of the merits of Jesus', her son. In other words, she was granted salvation in advance. It is this truth that the Church teaches through the dogma of "Immaculate Conception". Even when she is called the mother of the Church, the truth remains that she is also a member and part of the Church.

At Cana Jesus accepted Mary's intercession and presented her as the mediatrix; on Calvary he declared her as the Mother of the Church. Thus it is Jesus himself who bestowed on her the mission of "Intercessor and Mother". When Mary was given as mother and the disciple became her son, the Church was founded, marking the fulfillment of the salvific mission of Jesus. When we accept Mary as our Blessed Mother, we are accepting the revealed will of God as expressed by Jesus himself.

WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15, 34).

It is almost impossible to believe that these words came from Jesus' lips. However, in Mathew and Mark, these are the only words Jesus uttered from the Cross. Immediately after uttering these words he died with a loud cry. Luke and John on the other hand, have not recorded this utterance. What does this cry mean? Does this express a feeling of despair rising from the consciousness that the Father has abandoned him? How can a person who died on the Cross in despair be the Savior of humanity? Since it is one of the few words recorded in his mother tongue, Aramaic, there is no doubt that Jesus uttered them. Hence, it deserves careful study and reflection.

The Passion narrative starts with the agonizing prayer in the garden. In deep pain and utter helplessness, he prayed to the Father. “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will” (Mk. 14, 36). As a child calls his father, Jesus always called God, Abba. This form of address reflects child like love, closeness and confidence. Only from the Cross, Jesus addressed God, “My God”. As an obedient son, Jesus always sought and fulfilled the will of the Father and claimed that it was the sustaining force of his life. How then can such a cry arise from the beloved Son?



Why did here he address God as “my God” instead of “Abba” which was his custom.

As an answer to these questions, some say that Jesus was not crying but reciting the first verse of Psalm 22, the prayer of one persecuted. The following verses of the Psalm describe the suffering, fear, pain, and despair of the Psalmist. In the second part of the Psalm (22, 22-31), on the contrary, the psalmist proclaims God’s protection and his gratitude towards God. There is a common understanding that when the NT authors quote a verse from the OT, not only the verse just quoted but the whole passage should be taken into account. Hence it is only reasonable to conclude that, after saying the first verse loudly, Jesus recited the rest of the Psalm silently. Therefore it is argued that Jesus was confessing his trust and hope in God.

In spite of this explanation, the fact remains that it was a cry that has a profound meaning. Jesus had already suffered many of the things mentioned in the Psalm. (1) “I am a worm, hardly human; scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me” (Ps. 22, 7–8). Those stood around and passed by mocked him and laughed at him. (2) “Many dogs surround me; a pack of evildoers closes in on me” (Ps. 22, 13-16). He was surrounded by enemies gloating over him. (3) “They pierced my hands and feet” (Ps. 22, 17). He was nailed to the cross. (4) “They divide my clothes among themselves and for my clothing they cast lots” (Ps. 22, 18). The soldiers did the same to Jesus (Jn 19, 23-24).

The crucified Jesus has lost everything. The last gram of self respect was taken away from him. He was stripped of his clothes in public. He who was cheered by the crowd calling him a powerful prophet, wonder worker, great Master, the Messiah, son of David, now hung on the Cross as a picture of utter helplessness and failure and jeered at by onlookers

and passersby. He chose not to respond to their insults and challenges. Almost all his followers ran away. The ones who stood at the foot of the cross helplessly only increased his pain. His mental agony was even greater than the physical pain he experienced. But, the greatest pain was caused by the silence of the Father whom he trusted all his life.

Though he prayed in Gethsemane, the cup was not taken away and Jesus surrendered himself to the Will of the Father. But this silence, even at such a crucial hour, was more than what he could bear, because it gave the impression that all what he said, did and lived by were just a lie. The bystanders mocked him precisely on that point, challenging his relation to God: "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son" (Mt. 27, 43). We cannot fathom the depth of his pain that comes from the absence of God, the impossibility to see His face or hear His word. Not only that. It is even deeper. The real root of the painful cry does not seem to be just the silence of the Father or the fact that He did not bring the Son down from the cross. The total silence and absence filled his human consciousness with the impression that God has rejected him. This exactly is what a sinner experiences. Hence the cry: "why have you forsaken me?" reflects the pain of a humanity that has lost God.

All through his life Jesus had kept an intimate relationship with the Father and trusted that his Abba would never forsake him. But, the Father appeared to be far away and apparently indifferent. Now, the pain has moved from the body to the soul. The pain of being abandoned by God is the greatest pain of a sinner. Jesus experienced that pain in its fullness. It seemed as if he was standing at the edge of hell; as if he was separated from God, the source of his being, forever. He could not now call God "Abba" as he had always done. Now he has become

totally one with the sinners, or rather sin of the whole world has been placed on him. He felt like any sinner condemned to eternal damnation. The prophecy of the Baptist is now fulfilled: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1, 29). He has become the scapegoat that carries the sin of the people (Lev 16, 21-22).

The feeling of being cast away from God’s presence was a natural consequence of taking upon himself the sin of world. This was the greatest suffering Jesus underwent. It was a moment of utter darkness of the soul. The evangelists report that on that terrible day the sun set at noon and darkness covered the face of the earth. Would that be a reflection of Jesus’ state of mind? What a contrast between Bethlehem and Calvary! Jesus was born at midnight and those who awaited the coming of the Messiah saw then a great light. Now on Golgotha the light disappears at midday. Those who crucified the “Lord of life” extinguished the light for themselves and were flung into darkness at noon.

This cry of Jesus is taken in the bible with utmost seriousness and interpreted as a saving act. He suffered all the consequences of sin and went through the bitter experience of the sinner. There is no pain, no sorrow that he did not experience. He went even through the experience of being cast away from the presence of God. It was by drinking the cup of suffering to the bitter dregs that Jesus saved the world from the slavery of sin. The prophecy of Isaiah: “Upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed” (Is 53,5) is fulfilled. Paul interprets the redemptive nature of this suffering: “For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5, 21). The Letter to the Hebrews takes up this theme and explains it further: “He offered prayers and supplications with loud cries

and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence... and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,” (Heb. 5, 7-9). “He had to become like his brothers in every way, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God to expiate the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (Heb 2,17-18).

Even though Jesus cried out of the depth of pain and distress he did not die without hope as it is evident from the way he addressed the prayer with extreme earnestness: “My God, My God”. Even though it would seem that God has abandoned him, he clings to God with all his strength. He does not dare



call God Aabba, but calls him My God. This desperate cry is a heroic proclamation of faith that even if God seems to have abandoned me I will not leave Him. This faith in God is like the life-line for the one drowning.

The one who “did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave... humbled himself becoming obedient unto death” (Phil 2, 6-8) took upon himself the sin of the world and its consequences. The Father, who apparently remained silent and allowed the Son to die on the cross, did eventually acknowledge him as His Son by raising him from the dead. The one who reached the gate of hell entered into the presence of God and thus, opened the gate of heaven for humanity. In the article of faith we recite in the creed: “he descended into hell- ascended into heaven” one can find the meaning of this saying of the Master from the cross.

After hearing this cry of the Son of God from the cross no one can ever say “I am alone”. There is no pain, no suffering that Jesus has not experienced. He understands us, he stands by us. Looking at Jesus who suffered and died for us, we can find hope even in the midst of despair. He took upon himself our sins and our sufferings to give us hope and salvation. He will never leave us alone in our misery and that is the source of hope and everlasting hope for each one of us.

I THIRST

After this when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), I am thirsty” (Jn 19,28)

One of the unbearable experiences a person undergoes while dying on the Cross is the acute feeling of thirst. This was intensified for Jesus because of the torture he had to go through before. After the supper, the night before, he had nothing to eat or drink. Sweating blood in the garden was only the beginning of his indescribable suffering. At the command of Pilate, he was scourged and the whole body was filled with wounds. Scourging practiced by the Romans was a very cruel procedure. Five leather strips were attached to a rode. At the tip of these strips there were bones of metal pieces. So, each lash would inflict five deep wounds in the flesh. Added to this was the painful and shameful journey, carrying the heavy cross on which he was to be nailed. The heavy nails thrust into his arms and feet cut into his veins, causing heavy bleeding. All these could cause high fever and create severe thirst. Under these circumstances it was only natural that he would experience dehydration. In this condition, no one would be surprised to hear his utterance, “I am thirsty”. But, was that the only reason for the evangelist to record these words of the Master?

There is an apparent contradiction in these words as they came from the One who offered the source of living water to those who thirst. He who is the source of the living water must

have been experiencing not only the physical thirst but also another kind of thirst that goes beyond physical dehydration.

In John 4, 7 we see an incident where Jesus asked for a drink from a woman of Samaria who came to draw water. “Jesus said to her, Give me a drink” (Jn 4,7). However, by the end of the conversation, no one was concerned about the physical thirst and natural water. The one who came to draw water, left her jar and ran to the village. Jesus also forgot about his need to have a drink of water. When the disciples came with food, the Master was no more hungry and did not want any food. He said, “I have





food to eat of which you do not know” (Jn 4, 32). In the same way there would be something different about the thirst Jesus experienced from the Cross.

The introduction given by the Evangelist before recording these words of the Lord need to be examined closely. “After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said to fulfill the scripture, “I thirst.” (Jn 19, 28). Hence the aim of these words is to fulfill the prophecy written about Jesus in the Old Testament. Again there is an apparent contradiction. If everything is

fulfilled what else was there yet to be fulfilled? At the same time it is important to find out which passage was fulfilled by this utterance.

Nowhere in the Bible do we see this utterance written in the same manner. Hence a deeper search into the meaning, circumstances, and nuance of the saying is needed to find out which prophecy was fulfilled by it. After uttering these words Jesus accepted the vinegar lifted up to his lips and died saying, “It is fulfilled”. The final action of Jesus was accepting the vinegar. Therefore, according to Bible Scholars, it was the fulfillment of a prophecy connected with thirst and vinegar.

There seems to be two possibilities. It is impossible to ignore the influence of Psalm 22 on the passion narratives. In Psalm 22, there is a verse referring to thirst. “My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws” (Ps 22, 15). Some think that it is this acute thirst that is referred to by the thirst Jesus experienced. But, nothing is said about giving vinegar to quench the thirst and so this reference does not seem to be what the evangelist intended

So, the majority of scholars point out another passage, namely Ps. 69, 21 where it is written, “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” However, it would be more appropriate to consider that the utterance cited refer to both of these verses combined. Just by the fact that Jesus accepted the vinegar lifted to his lips does not mean that the thirst referred to physical dehydration. Thirst is not going to be quenched by wetting the lips. Hence, it is important to search into the kind of thirst Jesus experienced and how it was going to be quenched.

The declaration, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me” (Jn 4, 34) could shed some light on this problem. Jesus knew that it was time to leave this world and return to the Father.

“Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13,1). The second part of the Gospel of John is presented as the Book of Glory. It gives an extensive description about the completion of the words and deeds of Jesus. The “word that became flesh” came from the Father with a particular mission that was fulfilled when He returned to the Father and that was possible only through death. By handing over his mother to the disciple as his mother, and the disciple as her son, a new family which is the Church, was instituted. With that He completed the mission the Father had entrusted to Him. The only thing left was to return to the Father through death. Could this utterance “I am Thirsty” refer to the intense desire he felt for returning to the Father?

All the evangelists pointed out that the words of Jesus were often misunderstood. When Jesus called God, “Eloi, Eloi”, the people who stood by thought that he was calling Prophet Elijah. John has recorded many such misunderstandings of the words of Jesus. When Jesus spoke about the birth in the Spirit, Nicodemus thought he was referring to physical birth. “Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (Jn 3, 4). The Samaritan woman misunderstood the words Jesus spoke about the living water. “The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw” (Jn 4,15). Could it be possible that a similar misunderstanding occurred to the soldiers and they thought of only physical thirst when Jesus said, “I thirst”?

The thirst of Jesus cannot be quenched by wine, water or vinegar. He was thirsting not for drinking but for giving. He deeply desired to give his body as food for the humanity (Jn 6,

51); to give the Holy Spirit that is the source of life giving water (Jn 4, 14; 7, 37-39) to all. To give this spiritual food and drink, Jesus had to die. It was the broken body and poured out blood that became the food and drink of eternal life. The Holy Spirit was not given until then because Jesus had not been glorified. “Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (Jn 7, 39).

The words John used to refer to the death of Jesus deserve special attention. “When Jesus had received the vinegar he said, “It is finished”; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (Jn 19, 30). It meant that Jesus offered His life into the hands of the Father. The Greek word, “Paredokken” means he “handed over”. Jesus, rather than renouncing his life, handed over his spirit into the hands of the Father, the spirit who was at work in him all through his life on this earth. It also alludes to the giving of the Spirit of the Father to all those who believe in Jesus Christ. According to John the blood and water that gushed forth the pierced heart of Jesus, was the sign of the Spirit given to all.

Ultimately the thirst of Jesus was to give the Holy Spirit (Jn 5, 63) that marked the fulfillment of his mission. The salvific mission of Jesus was completed by the giving of the Spirit. The divine Helper would abide with the Apostles (Jn 14, 16-26) and lead them to the fullness of Truth (Jn 16, 13). It was in this sense that Jesus said that He was feeling thirsty. Thirsting for souls means the ardent desire to save the humanity. Hence the “thirst” refers to the intense desire to save every soul from eternal damnation. The thirst of Jesus still continues as He loves each and every one of us so deeply that He wants all of us to be saved, to enjoy eternal happiness with Him and with the Father. The thirst of Jesus can be quenched not by giving vinegar but only by saving souls.



IT IS FULFILLED

“After Jesus had taken the wine he said, It is fulfilled; and bowing his head he gave up his spirit” (Jn 19, 30).

The end of the earthly life of Jesus is reported by the evangelists in different ways. Matthew and Mark state that Jesus made a loud cry and breathed his last. According to Luke, “Jesus cried out in a loud voice: Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. Having said this, he breathed his last” (Lk 23, 46). John has a different ending: “After Jesus had taken the wine he said, it is fulfilled; and bowing his head he gave up his spirit” (Jn 19, 30).

What is translated as “it is fulfilled” is the Greek word “tetelestai”. This is the passive perfect tense of the Greek verb “teleo”, which is related to the noun “telos”. The noun telos can mean end, purpose or goal. Hence the statement could be translated as “it is all over” or “it is accomplished”. If we take the first meaning then the implication of the utterance would be a sense of relief that comes from the end of the ordeal. But, that does not seem to be what Jesus meant or the evangelist wanted to convey. Jesus has said many times that the Cross was not imposed on him but he willingly accepted it. (Jn 7, 28; 8, 42; 9,39; 10,10; 12,27). Hence the intended meaning of the word under consideration must be the second: it is accomplished, or fulfilled. It would express the sense of satisfaction and the declaration of victory of having fulfilled all that has been entrusted to him by the Father.

During his earthly life, many times Jesus had encountered the temptation to do his own will rather than what the Father wanted from him to do. Soon after Baptism, he faced this temptation in the desert. He was challenged to turn stones into bread, to jump from the pinnacle of Jerusalem temple presuming God's protection and to renounce God in order to gain all the worldly power and glory. But, Jesus recognized these as temptations coming from the Evil One and rejected them all. Refusing to take the easy ways of miracle and power Jesus decided to embrace, the will of the Father, the way of the Cross. Even the disciples had tried to persuade him to turn away from the way of the Cross (Mt. 16, 22). Temptation to follow the way of the world continued throughout his public life and it became most crucial in Gethsemane where he prayed: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (Mt. 26, 30).

The inner conflict between the human desire to avoid suffering and the firm resolve to follow the will of the Father reached its climax on the Cross. Those who watched from the ground challenged him to come down so that they would believe. Even the Father seemed to have abandoned him. In spite of all these, Jesus did not doubt or falter for a moment. He was determined to fulfill the will of the Father to the bitter end. It is the sense of satisfaction and joy of having remained faithful and accomplished the salvific plan of the Father that is reflected in the last word: "it is finished".

All that the prophets had foretold about the Messiah have been fulfilled in Jesus. It is worth noting that the Greek expression *tetelesthai* is in the passive voice, known as divine passive, implying thereby that everything has been brought to fulfillment by God. In fact Jesus has said time and again that it is not he but the Father working in and through him: "the Father



who dwells in me is doing his works” (Jn 14, 10). Jesus fulfilled the mission entrusted to him by the Father, drank the cup to the bitter dregs (Jn 18.11). “Although he was the Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb 5, 8 – 9). What happens after this proclamation about the fulfillment is Jesus’ death. Even the death is presented as a voluntary act: “Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (Jn 19, 30).

In all appearance, Jesus was brutally murdered. The Jewish religious leaders and Roman authority repeatedly put him on trial and could find no crime in him; he was proved innocent. Yet

the Jewish leaders insisted and the Roman authority complied with to crucify him. The powers of darkness ruled over the world. The sin of the world showed its horrible face in the act of Crucifying Jesus. But, when we look at the crucifixion in the light of faith, it was the ultimate sacrifice, the totally free offering of life that redeemed the world. Jesus made this clear when he said, “This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own” (Jn. 10, 17–18). At the same time it is the supreme manifestation of the love of the Father: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (Jn 3, 16).

The entire Old Testament has been pointing to this sacrifice. It was to offer this unique sacrifice that the Son of God became the Son of Man (Jn 12, 17). It is this sacrifice that reconciled the entire humanity with God and opened the gates of heaven for them. A small little detail in the crucifixion account of John deserves special attention here. Jesus was given the sour wine soaked in a sponge on a branch of hyssop (Jn 19, 29). Hyssop appears in the bible for the first time in connection with the Passover in Egypt. “Then take a bunch of hyssop, and dipping it in the blood that is in the basin, sprinkle the lintel... Seeing the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over that door and not let the destroyer come into your houses to strike you down” (Ex 12, 22 - 23). It was a way to escape from the angel of death but at the same time a symbol of eternal salvation humanity would attain through the blood of Jesus, the Lamb. Jesus is depicted as the Passover Lamb and it is striking that he was handed over to be crucified at the very hour when the Jews were starting to slaughter the lambs for the Passover meal (Jn 19, 14).

Through his death Jesus accomplished his mission. He atoned for the sin of the world; reconciled humanity with the Father, opened the gates of heaven that were closed due to sin, and poured out the Holy Spirit as he had promised (Jn 7, 39). Thus, the redemptive plan is completed. With a loud cry Jesus gave up his life voluntarily. While Mathew (27, 50) and Mark (15, 37) presented it as shout of victory, John presented it as the fulfillment of Jesus' mission.

Jesus is our model for fulfilling the will of the Father. Our success or failure in life is to be measured by the way we fulfill the will of God for us. The words of Paul: "I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4, 7) can be seen as an example of following the will of God as Jesus did. The last word of the Master should be an inspiration for the disciples to remain faithful to the one who called them, overcoming temptations to follow the ways of the world; to walk on the way of the Cross, renouncing the comfort and luxury offered by the world. Happy the disciple who, as Jesus, can say at the end of his life: "It is accomplished"

FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS

“It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”; and when he had said this he breathed his last” (Lk 23, 44 - 46).

This is the 7th and the last word of Jesus from the Cross. In the Bible, seven is a number of perfection or fulfillment. Hence this word marked the fulfillment of Jesus’ activities, teachings, mission and life on the earth. According to Mark and Mathew, Jesus made a loud cry and breathed his last. In John, only one short sentence is uttered: “It is fulfilled”. Luke added to the loud cry a few more words that explain and interpret the meaning of the cry. It was a prayer of total self-surrender into the hands of the Father.

A closer look at the circumstance under which this word was uttered would shed further light into the saying itself. It was about noon, the time when they were getting ready to kill the Paschal lamb in the temple of Jerusalem. According to the fourth gospel that was the time when Pilate pronounced the sentence condemning Jesus to die on the Cross. According to the Synoptic Gospels that was the hour when Jesus was crucified. In spite of the differences in the details, all the four Evangelists imply that Jesus was the real Paschal Lamb.



Luke has recorded two unusual events right before Jesus uttered his last word. Darkness came over the earth at noon and the veil of the temple was torn down the middle (23, 44 - 45). Mark (15, 33) and Mathew (27, 45) also have recorded these events, using the same words. Darkness at noon evokes a number of OT passages. In the book of Job it is presented as part of the punishment of the wicked. “They meet with darkness in the daytime and at noonday they grope as though it were night” (Job 5, 14). Killing Jesus was the culmination of wickedness. Those who rejected “the Light of the world” will have to grope in darkness. Other passages such as Jer 13, 16; 15, 9; Ez 32, 7; Am 5, 8; 8, 9 present darkness at noon as a sign of the day the Lord comes to judge the world. Death of Jesus was a sentence on evil. Jesus had warned earlier: “Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out” (Jn 12, 31).

The death of Jesus on the Cross marked the end of the dominion of evil over the world and the beginning of the new age of salvation. This was symbolized by the tearing of the temple veil (Lk 23, 45). The importance of the veil consists in this that it separated the holy of holies from the rest of the temple. Only once in a year and only the high priest was allowed to enter the holy of holies. As the veil is torn, the holy of holies becomes visible to all implying thereby that all are granted access to the presence of God. This also points to the fact that Jesus, the true High Priest, has entered the presence of God through his death on the Cross. According to Mark and Mathew, the veil was torn after the death of Jesus. According to Luke, both signs that explain the meaning of Jesus’ death took place right before he breathed his last.

The last word of Jesus was a prayer. When everybody rejected him and mocked him, he anchored his hope in God and prayed quoting a verse from Psalm 31. This was a Psalm regularly

used in the temple and Synagogue services. Mothers used to encourage the children to recite this verse, “into your hands I commend my spirit” (Ps 31, 6), before going to sleep. This is the best and most appropriate prayer to say in time of danger, when the sun goes down and darkness covers the earth at noon. Jesus might have said this prayer many times before going to bed. What is special here is that Jesus added an invocation, “Father” at the beginning of the prayer. With this the evangelist is telling us that Jesus placed his soul in the hands of his Father, as a child who goes to sleep. There is no fear or despair. Instead, firm faith and total trust in God is evidenced in the address, “Abba”. This shows that death is not an end but a rest in the hands of God, the loving Father.

Jesus, who took upon himself the sin of the world, experienced all its horrible consequences in his own body. He made his own the utter misery of the sinner depicted in the story of the prodigal son. Now at last, as the son in the story got up and went to the father’s house, so Jesus is going back to his Father’s house. After reconciling the whole world to God, Jesus entered the presence of God. The one who came from God went back to God.

The first word of Jesus, recorded in the Gospels, was connected with the Father. It is Luke who has recorded for us that first word: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” (Lk 2, 49). Now it is the same evangelist who has kept in record for us the last word of Jesus as well. From the beginning to the end, the only motivating force that guided Jesus was his relationship with the Father. He was in a constant and unbroken communion with his Abba. Luke, more than the other evangelists, takes a special interest in depicting the prayer of Jesus. Hence, quite naturally, he tells us that the last breath of Jesus was a prayer.

“Commending the spirit” could be seen as an interpretation of the death. But, there is more. It also hints at Jesus’ relationship with the Holy Spirit. His earthly life began with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Mary (Lk 1, 35) and the public life began, when the Holy Spirit came down upon him and anointed him for the prophetic mission (Lk 3, 22; Acts 10, 38). It was the power of the Spirit that enabled him to defeat Satan in the desert and to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God (Lk 4, 1-14; 10, 21). Now that his mission is over, he returns the Spirit to the Father, marking the beginning of the age of the Holy Spirit in the history of salvation. That might be the reason why Jesus asked the apostles to remain in Jerusalem until the coming of the Spirit. “Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Lk. 24, 49). “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).

Luke presents Jesus not only as Lord and Savior but also as the model for us. The way Jesus died was the greatest model of all. As a child sleeps in the bosom of its mother, Jesus entrusted his spirit in the hands of the Father and breathed his last. It was the beginning of a new life. Jesus showed that death is not something to be feared but accepted as the door to eternal life, to the presence of the heavenly Father. May he bless us to breath our last, saying “Father into your hands I commend my soul”.

CONCLUSION

Many reasons and explanations can be given for the death of Jesus. But, only in the light of faith can we understand and explain its true meaning. From an external point of view, the Crucifixion of Jesus was the worst sin in history. “You murdered the Lord of life” (Acts 2, 15). The history of evil which began with the sin of the first parents and grew with the murder of Abel by Cain, reached its climax with the killing of the Son of Man, the Son of God who became man for the salvation of the world. With the crucifixion of Jesus, it looked as though evil has triumphed and Satan has won the ultimate victory on Golgotha.

Looked at from another point of view, in the light of faith, we can see an entirely different picture. God so loved the world that He gave his only Son to save the world. The crucifixion was the ultimate expression of God’s love for humanity. It was the self sacrifice of the Son who surrendered himself totally to the will of the Father. It was done in filial obedience to the Father. Through this perfect obedience, Jesus repaired the damage caused by the disobedience of the first parents. Satan had established his reign over humanity and sin multiplied in the world. Jesus carried the weight of all the sin of the world and by dying on the Cross won victory over sin and death and saved the humanity from their clutches. “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Is 53,5). Humanity was freed from the clutches of sin and death through the self-

sacrifice of the sinless One in atonement for the sins of the world.

The apparent failure was in fact the true victory. Jesus expressed this in these words: "This is the time of judgment. Now the authority of the world will be overcome" (Jn 12, 31). Through his death Jesus won victory over Satan who had authority over the sinful humanity (Heb 2, 15). Through his death and resurrection, Jesus opened the gates of heaven for man, opened the path of liberation to those who remained in the valley of darkness.

Death of Jesus is like the dying of the grain of wheat that fall on the ground to produce abundant fruit (Jn 12, 24); like the shepherd who lays down his life to save his sheep (Jn 10,11). It is the ultimate expression of love that is expressed by giving life for saving a friend (Jn 15, 13). Hence each person can say, "He loved me so much that he died for me" (Gala 2, 20).

The death and resurrection of Jesus was the clearest sign that God detests everything that enslaves human beings. It is the supreme example of defeating evil by good, hatred by love; selfishness by unselfish love and arrogant pride by humble obedience. Through his death Jesus established the victory of Truth over dishonesty and Light over darkness and Life over death.

The one who died on the Cross erected bridge between heaven and earth; reconciled humanity to God; made a new family by attracting all to Himself. Hence we are no more strangers or aliens but the members of the same family, parts of the same body, and branches of the same tree. This is made possible by the Holy Spirit. It is this Spirit of God that leads us to the fullness of life; the Spirit that makes it possible for us to call God, Abba Father.

While opening endless possibilities, the crucified Jesus presents certain challenges to humanity. It challenges us to offer our lives for Truth and Justice; to be bread broken for others. Since God so loved the world to give his only son we are obliged to love one another (1 Jn 4, 10-11).

When we forgive those who hurt us, when we suffer in order to help the needy, when we love even our enemies, we become the children of God and identify with the Crucified Lord. He who carried our sins, He who promised to wipe away our tears, remains with us at all times. He dwells in us to strengthen us, to console us, to enlighten our mind, to show us the way. "I am with you to the end of time" (Mt 28, 20).

