

MICHAEL KARIMATTAM

LOSER'S GOSPEL



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From Cain to Judas, we see many characters in the Bible who utterly failed to live according to the sacred call they received from God. There are incidents that are not only not edifying but are out right scandalous. Why does the Bible, the Word of God, written by people who were inspired to reveal the plan of God to save the sinful humanity present such offensive stories and immoral characters? What are the sacred authors trying to tell us through these characters and episodes? What can we learn from them? This book tries to find an answer to these questions by analyzing 16 of such characters, from Adam to Ananias.



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



MEDIA HOUSE

375-A, Pocket - 2, Mayur Vihar Phase 1,
Delhi 110 091

Ph: 011- 43042096, 09555642600, 07042752030

Email : mediahousedelhi@gmail.com,

info.mhdelhi@gmail.com

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E-mail: mediahousedelhi@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Who wants to think of people who failed in life? History is made by people who succeeded in life and accomplished great things. When looking back every nation would emphasize the positive growth and minimize the negative aspects. The natural tendency is to hide the failures and expose the success. Those who boast about self hide their failures and proclaim loudly their victories and accomplishments. Another's failure, it is thought, would add color to the victory of self. From the beginning the attempt is to teach children how to succeed in life and for that purpose the examples of the successful persons are highlighted.

However, when we turn to the Bible, we see that it contains not only the history of those who succeeded but also those who failed, failed miserably in life! In fact the most important person in the bible is the one who accepted the greatest failure. At the age of 33 he was condemned to die, the most painful and shameful death, by being nailed to the Cross between two thieves, like a criminal. He hung on the Cross, between heaven and earth, rejected by all, insulted by the onlookers who challenged him to come down and prove his divinity. The Father, in whom he had put all the hope and trust, did not respond to his desperate cry for help. So, he was the greatest loser of all!

In a way Bible is the history of those who failed rather than succeeded in life. When we look closely at the teaching of Jesus we can see that real success is accomplished by these losers. He demonstrated this through the example of the seed that has to die in order to give life to a new plant. When one loses one's life for the Kingdom of God, one gains eternal life. Failures are not

only the stepping stone to success; the very failures become the source of real success. That is why St. John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, depicted death of Jesus as the moment of glorification. It is possible to present the same truth in different ways. An attempt is made in this book to look beyond the obvious.

Bible has many characters. The history of failure starts in the very beginning of the Bible. Their list extends from the first parents to the great whore who became drunk by the blood of the martyrs (Rev17, 1-6). It depicts the lives of the wicked, drunkards, killers, prostitutes, traitors etc. Why so many negative characters are depicted, one would ask, in the Bible, the Holy Book, that narrates the salvation history, the history of saving, God enacted over the years? Many incidents seen in the bible are not only not edifying, but outright scandalous. The unprovoked killing by Cain, immoral actions of Lot, David and Solomon; jealousy of the High Priest Aaron etc. are only a few examples. Why did the Bible present all these characters? What does the Bible want to teach by telling these stories?

Constant conflict between good and evil is a major theme of the Bible. There is good as well as evil in the world. In reality it is the presence of evil that adds color to the good. If there was no darkness, light would not be appreciated. Without a dark background one cannot write in white. It is hunger that adds taste to the food. The entire universe and all the living creatures depict light and darkness. The goodness of virtue is accentuated by the presence of sin. It is death that enhances the value of life. In short, in the present life as we know it, both are inevitable.

When the history reaches its ultimate goal, there will be no more evil, no pain, no suffering, no tears, no death and no more farewells, only the eternal bliss! Till that moment the conflict will continue. There will be success and failures. The apparent

failures, however, need not be real failures. In the same way, the apparent success might prove to be a real failure.

The ones who failed as well as the ones who succeeded have something to say to all of us. Abel would not have shined so well without Cain. It is the selfishness of Lot that added color to the love of Abraham. It was the Stubbornness and cruelty of Pharaoh that forced Yahweh to demonstrate His liberating power and merciful love for the people. Going a step further, one could say it is the Satan who made the Savior necessary. If there is no sin there is no need for forgiveness. That is what St. Augustine meant when sung: O Felix Culpa! O blessed sin that gave us such a Savior! Hence, the so called “bad” persons may have something very important to teach us.

1

ROOT OF THE FALL



ADAM AND EVE

“In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return”
(Gen 3,19)

The search for the root of failures and those who failed would lead us to the very beginning of humanity. We see that it began with the creation of man and in Paradise where there was nothing lacking and where man enjoyed the active presence of God. God created human being in his own image and gave them power over the world. “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing

that creeps upon the earth” (Gn 1, 26). This was the plan of God for humanity.

To save man from loneliness he was given a suitable companion, a partner in life to love and support each other. They were to live in Paradise where they had everything they needed and were given the responsibility of cultivating the land and protecting it. They were given the blessing to be fruitful and fill the earth with their children who would fill the earth with the glory of God.

Though man was given full authority in the paradise, one thing was forbidden: eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2, 16-17). This command has caused a challenge to the logic of human mind. Why did God give such a command? Why did God create such a tree and put it in their reach? Was God setting up man to fail? Ultimately was it not God who is responsible for the fall of human beings? This was reflected in Adam's response to God when he was questioned about his disobedience. The man said, “The woman whom thou gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen 3, 12).

The fall began with the forbidden fruit. The tempter provoked man to analyze the command of God and made him doubt that there was some hidden agenda or secret in that command. The words of the tempter: “God knows in fact that the day you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good from evil”, appeared more attractive than the command of God. “The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye and that it was enticing for the

wisdom that it could give. So she took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it” (Gen 3, 5-6).

There is an irresistible attraction to the forbidden. It seems that it is innate to the human nature. If a child is told not to do something, he/she would look for the opportune moment to do it. A book that is banned will be read by more people than usual. This was true from the beginning of humanity. The forbidden fruit attracted their thought, imagination and the whole self. It was attractive to the eye and desirable for the mind as it would give them more knowledge. The woman was tempted first. It is difficult to say if it has any special significance. What is important is that human nature was subjected to temptation and they wanted to be like God. That also is a natural temptation. One always looks up and sees others who are better than self and longs to be like them. So, it was only natural for Adam and Eve to desire to be like God whose condition was better than theirs.

Adam and Eve were created in the image of God. They had domination over all the creation but they felt something was lacking. That was the source of temptation. They could not be satisfied by having the image of God, they wanted to be like God, establish equality with God. For that they dared to break the commandment given by God as that was the only way to achieve the equality they so desired.

Human nature is not satisfied by anything in this world. The mind keeps on longing for more and more. They want freedom and authority, limitless freedom and authority to decide what to do and when; they do not want anyone above them, giving them orders. As long as there is someone above them, they will not be free. Such thoughts became irresistible but they did not think that it would lead them to evil. They were prepared to go against

the command of God, in order to get full freedom and total use of their mind, intellect and body, as they wish. In the process, they forgot who created them and who gave them all that they had. They began to think of God as an adversary rather than their sole benefactor. Even though the temptation to do so came from outside, they could not avoid the internal conflict.

“She took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it” (Gen 3, 6). In a few simple words, the sacred author depicted the most terrible, tragic incident that marked the beginning of every evil. With that everything changed. Their eyes were opened but what they were able to see was only their naked form which made them feel ashamed. Though, they were naked before, they had not felt any shame about it. So, their first knowledge was about their nakedness. They lost the grace of God that had covered them and that new knowledge brought shame. In vain they tried to cover their nakedness by sawing leaves together. Their final attempt to hide from God also failed.

As they disobeyed God, they feared the presence of God. They lost the Paradise, the symbol of harmony. Man became alien to self, to each other, to the entire creation and to God. They put themselves outside the presence of God and the human life as we know today started. Even before God put them on trial and pronounced the judgment, they had lost everything. God's judgment only confirmed the state in which they had placed themselves by their disobedience.

So, human life as we know today began as a consequence of disobedience of the first parents. This fall, however, was not the end but the beginning of a new way of life. The fall set humanity on the path of search. Without the fall, man might not have searched for anything. It was the fall and the

consequent promise of salvation that shaped the human history and Salvation history. They could have preserved their innocence and stayed in the presence of God but that was not the plan of God. It was the fall that made the salvation, coming of the Saviour, Jesus Christ, necessary and possible. Hence St. Augustine called it “Blessed sin that brought such a Savior” to us. The tree of knowledge in the Paradise led to the Tree of Life on Golgotha.

In the presentation of creation and fall of man, we see the human nature in the light of Divine revelation. Temptation, sin, punishment and salvation were part of God’s plan for humanity. What happened in the paradise was a great failure, the beginning of all the ensuing failures. But it was not only a failure but also a blessing that marked the beginning of Salvation History. Sin and failures are not good in themselves, but God can bring good out of them. God does not desire sin but allows it. “Just as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience are many to be made upright. When law came on the scene, it was to multiply the offences. But however much sin increased, grace was always greater” (Rom 5, 19-20).

The ones, who tried to become equal to God by eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, lost the paradise and were destined to struggle. The one that was taken from the soil would return to the soil. But, in this death, there was the seed of life. When one man dies, another one is born and thus life continues. Adam and Eve walked out of the paradise but they had received the promise that man would defeat death and would regain the lost paradise.

Ultimately it is God who makes this promise attainable for humanity. It was for this purpose that Jesus, the God incarnate, took upon himself the weight of all the failures, sin of the whole

world and died on the Cross as an embodiment of total failure. Through this, He transformed failures into success, death into life. Thus, reconciling humanity with God, the gate of Heaven, Paradise, was opened again for humanity. In fact, it was the fall of the first parents that made this salvation possible. In short, there is no need to lose heart at the face of a failure as it contains the seed of success.

2 UNDYING MURDERER



CAIN

*“Yahweh put a mark on Cain,
so that no one coming across him would kill him”*
(Gen 4, 15).

Human history is soaked in blood. There were times when pools of blood could be seen on Highways and byways. The air is filled by the shouting of the killers and cries of the dying. The mourning of the wounded is as old as human history. It started with Cain, the second in line of the losers in the history of humanity.

Cain is known to all as the one who killed his brother, the one who committed the first murder and so became synonym to all

the murders and all the crimes in the world. St. John depicted Cain as the progeny of the devil. “This is what distinguishes the children of God from the children of the devil: whoever does not live uprightly and does not love his brother is not from God. This is the message which you heard from the beginning, that we must love one another, not to be like Cain, who was from the Evil One and murdered his brother” (1 Jn 3, 10-12). St. Jude presents him as one never to be imitated and calls those who are involved in immoral traffic, the followers of Cain: “Alas for them, because they have followed Cain” (Jude 1, 11). So, Cain appears to be carrying the burden of shedding human blood over the centuries. Why did this happen? Who is Cain and what is the message the Bible gives through him?

As if to overcome the death sentence God pronounced on humanity, Adam called his wife Eve. “The man named his wife ‘Eve’ because she was the mother of all those who live” (Gen 3, 20). This naming seems to indicate that death can be overcome by giving life to a new generation. Even as the death sentence looms large on the horizon the woman carries the seed of life in her. It is through her that humanity would continue to exist. Eve confessed this truth when she looked at her first born and said, “I have acquired a man with the help of Yahweh” (Gen 4,1). The name Cain came from the Hebrew word, “Ghana” which means the gift of God.

The first parents loved and valued the life they acquired by the help of God. They brought him up with great love and affection. With the arrival of the second baby, Abel, their joy increased. They brought up the children in the fear of God and taught them to pray, to offer sacrifice to God. Yet, it happened. Cain took his brother to the field and killed him. Why did he do it? What caused the first born, the gift of God, destined to preserve humanity through future generations, to decide to destroy life? Why did Cain see his little brother as an enemy?

When the sacred author says that the first murder took place in the context of a sacrifice, it has profound implications. Two people who believe in the same God, offered sacrifice from their products. There was nothing lacking in the objects sacrificed. The shepherd offered parts of the lamb while the farmer offered part of his produce from the field. There is no mention of conflict between them. Apparently the sacrifice marked a turning point in their relationship.

“Yahweh looked with favour on Abel and his offering. But he did not look with favour on Cain and his offering, and Cain was very angry and downcast” (Gen 4, 4-5). Why did God reject the offering of Cain? There seems to be something mysterious as in the case of the tree of knowledge in the Paradise. Cain became naturally angry and upset because he considered that God showed partiality by accepting Abel’s offering and rejecting his. He felt that God had rejected him. Who can blame Cain for being hurt? On a deeper level, was it not God who is responsible for the ensuing events because it was God who showed partiality by accepting Abel’s offering and rejecting Cain’s and thus causing enmity between them? For no apparent reason, some are accepted and some are rejected. This is a phenomenon we see in the world. St. Paul analyzed this in the life of the Patriarchs and came to the conclusion that it pointed to the mystery of the plan of God (Rom 9, 1-18). “What was said to Rebecca when she was pregnant by our ancestor, Isaac, before her children were born, so that neither had yet done anything either good or bad ... the elder one will serve the younger... I loved Jacob but hated Esau” (Rom 9, 9-13). Anyway, in the case of Cain, the sacred author gives an explanation.

“The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen 4, 6-7). This

indicates that there was something wrong in Cain and the way he operated. Apparently it was not in the object offered but in the mentality of Cain. It is possible that Cain went to offer the sacrifice while nurturing anger and hatred towards his brother. So, God warned about the sin lurking at the door, evil thoughts in his heart. The Bible does not say why Cain hated his brother.

We see the other side of the temptation, the first parents experienced in the Paradise. Rejection of God and of the fellow humans are the two sides of the same coin. The first parents sinned by rejecting God. Their son, Cain sinned by rejecting his brother. The one who rejects God would necessarily reject his/her brother/sister. Anyone who places anything - money, power, pleasure - in the place of God, would act against their fellow human beings. Even those who think that they worship God seem to fall into this trap when they hold on to their ideals and rituals without being sensitive to the feelings and needs of others. How much blood has been shed in the name of religion, because of difference of beliefs and cultic practices! However, one who worships the true God cannot help but accept, love and respect others as brothers and sisters, regardless of their cast and creed.

Upon reading carefully, we can see that had God warned Cain regarding his anger and hatred towards his brother. But Cain did not listen to the warning; he had become blind with envy. It was God who accepted and rejected the sacrifice, but Cain was powerless against God and so he turned against Abel. He did not have the openness to hear God's warning because he had become a slave to his passion. It is the failure to remain open that leads to fights and wars in the world.

Being in the grip of sin, Cain moved strategically. He invited Abel to come to the field. Unaware of the anger and evil intention of Cain, Abel accepted the invitation and went

with him. “Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him” (Gen 4, 8). Thus the first murder was committed. There is a story about the way red came into the sky and red flowers on the plants. Initially the dawn did not produce red rays of light. But, seeing the blood of Abel, Sun was shocked and his face turned red like the blood of Abel. After that the sky began to be red in the morning and evening. The plants, on which the blood of Abel was spilled, produced red flowers.

Since Cain took Abel to the field, he thought that no one would come to know about his action and there would be no witness to accuse him. He was wrong. God who sees everything saw it and questioned Cain. “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand” (Gen 4, 10-11). The very land he loved turned against him. “Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me” (Gen 4, 13-14). This is a cry from the heart of a loser; it marked a turning point.

Cain had dreamt of taking possession of everything by eliminating his brother whom he considered his rival, but he lost everything. When God asked “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain responded with defiance “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” Hearing God’s punishment, Cain’s arrogance gave way to mourning, “My punishment is greater than I can bear!”. He realized that he gained nothing by killing his brother. The arrogance expressed in asking “am I my brother’s keeper” gave way to grief and feeling of defeat. This realization is the positive side of his failure. It taught the world that no one can

gain anything by eliminating his/her brother.

God placed a mark on the forehead of Cain as a sign of taking him under His protection and safeguarding his life. Cain's hands were stained with blood; it could neither be denied nor covered up. Still God assured Cain that no one would be allowed to kill him. "Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him" (Gen 4, 15). Even before issuing the warning, "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed" (Gen 9, 6), God promised protection even to the murderer.

This protection was promised to Cain not as a license to continue the killing but to show that God desires not the death but the salvation of the sinner. The God who is revealed in the Bible is not the God of death but of life. The Lord has said, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways" (Ez 33, 11). However, the one who committed the crime must become aware of his sin and repent over it. Until then he would wander carrying the weight of his sin; no one must kill him. In other words Cain cannot escape the suffering through death.

Cain who killed his brother touched the bottom of his fall at the moment God confronted him. From there he could slowly raise and climb back. God gave him another chance. "He left the presence of God and settled in Nod, east of Eden" (Gen 4, 16). He married and had children and built a city in the name of his son, Enoch. Thus he preserved his name. The culture of Cain became the city culture and they started industry and art. Among their descendents arose hostility and conflicts.

What is presented through Cain is not just the story of two brothers. It is evident from the statement that Cain was a farmer

and Abel was a shepherd. Primitive people lived eating wild berries and hunting. Farming and animal husbandry began only much later. It is obvious that there were other people as Cain said that all those who would see him would try to kill him and that he married someone and had children. Hence, it is not the story of two brothers but the story of humanity. Instead of loving and protecting, they hate and kill each other.

The Yahwist historian who wrote the story of humanity presented some profound truths through a simple story of a family. The Israelites who wandered through the desert in search of the Promised Land were shepherds. The countries through which they had to pass, Edom, Moab etc., were inhabited by farming people. They not only refused a passage to the Israelites but came to fight with them (Num20-21). The story of Cain and Abel might have reflected this experience.

During the time of David, Israel became a powerful empire. His son, Solomon acted like an emperor, living in pomp and luxury. In order to build the palaces and cities, people were subjected to heavy taxation. While the king and his officials lived in luxury, the people suffered extreme poverty and abject misery. By recording that: “Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines” (1 Kg 11, 3), the sacred author shows the kind of life style Solomon was leading. Evil thrived in the cities more and city culture is presented as the culture of Cain.

In short, Cain is a symbolic rather than historic character; a symbol that represents all the human blood shed since the beginning of humanity. Cain is behind every bloody revolution and war, every violent conflict that led to bloodshed. Cain is hidden under the religious fanaticism, corrupt business practices and laws that cause the majority to starve while a few live in luxury. In a way, Cain is in every person, in every one who hates

his/her brother or sister. The words of St. John, "All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them" (1Jn 3, 15), invites us for a deep examination of our conscience. Before we accuse others we need to examine our attitude and operating style.

The blood stain of Cain can be washed only by the blood of the Lamb. "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). St. John presents the condition to be washed in the blood of the Lamb, "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 (1Jn 1,7). These words give us hope. God desires all to be saved and that is the plan of God for humanity. That is why the Lord keeps on giving us life and opportunities to repent and return to Him.

3

LYING IN DRUNKEN NUDITY



NOAH

“Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD. These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God”
(Gen 6, 8-9)

How holy and innocent was that life! He was the one person who stood as the bridge between two ages, between primeval history and human history. God had created everything including human beings and was so happy with them because they were very good. “God saw all he had made, and indeed it

was very good” (Gn 1, 31). However, misusing the freedom, man filled the earth with wickedness to the point that God regretted creating human beings and decided to destroy them. “Yahweh saw that human wickedness was great on earth and that human hearts contrived nothing but wicked schemes all day long. Yahweh regretted having made human beings on earth and was grieved at heart. And Yahweh said, ‘I shall rid the surface of the earth of the human beings whom I created - human and animal, the creeping things and the birds of heaven - for I regret having made them’” (Gen 6, 5-7). But God remembered Noah even in the midst of this painful decision. He was so good and so consoling even for God.

According to the Biblical account Noah comes as the 10th generation of humanity. He was born 126 years after the death of Adam. The name Noah meant the one who consoles. It was his Father, Lamech who gave him that name. “He gave him the name Noah because, he said, ‘Here is one who will give us, in the midst of our toil and the labouring of our hands, a consolation out of the very soil that Yahweh cursed’” (Gen 5, 29). True to his father’s expectation, Noah provided not only consolation but also hope and preservation of creation. The nature shuddered at the fury of the creator and the whole face of the earth was covered with water. It was the end of an age. When the whole world was submerged in water, Noah with his family remained safe in the Ark as a ray of hope.

The only family that survived after the flood consisted of Noah, his wife, three sons and their wives. It was through Noah that the humanity continued and so Noah marked the beginning of a new age in the world. The Bible says that God secured the continuation of all the creatures through Noah. The earth was covered with water for 150 days after which God remembered Noah (Gen 8, 1), a remembrance that led to the restoration of the face of the earth. God promised never to destroy the earth

again by a flood, “Never again will I curse the earth because of human beings, because their heart contrives evil from their infancy. Never again will I strike down every living thing as I have done” (Gen 8, 21).

The first thing Noah did after coming out of the Ark was offering a sacrifice to the Lord. Pleased with the offering, God promised not to destroy the world again (Gen 8, 21). God accepted man with all his weaknesses and promised to give protection. In the new age, Noah was God’s instrument and through his descendants the world was filled. Just as God had blessed Adam, He blessed Noah: “Be fruitful then and multiply, teem over the earth and subdue it! (Gen 9, 7). In every way, God was pleased with Noah as he was holy and blameless, still something went wrong.

It all started with farming. “Noah, a tiller of the soil, was the first to plant the vine” (Gen 9, 20). The original Hebrew text indicates that it was Noah, a man of the soil that started growing vineyards and making wine. Like Adam and Cain, he too was a farmer. Noah who survived the flood went back to farming. These descriptions might give the impression that God had something against farmers! But the words of Jesus, presented in John 15, 1 eliminate such assumptions. “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser” (Jn 15, 1). Another possibility is that it reflects the enmity that existed between shepherds and farmers. However, Noah’s discovery of vine growing led to the ensuing disasters.

Wine has the capacity to gladden our hearts but too much of it could cause one to lose the clarity of mind. Noah drank the wine and that made him unaware of his actions. “He drank some of the wine, and while he was drunk, he lay uncovered in his tent” (Gen 9, 21). It does not say that in his unconscious state he became uncovered. The original Hebrew text seems to

indicate that he exposed himself. Nudity just did not happen. The first parents were nude but that did not make them ashamed. Nudity became a cause of shame only after they broke the commandment of God. They had tried to cover themselves with fig leaves but God saw that it was useless. God made dress for them with leather before sending them out of the paradise. It was that dress that was removed in this incident.

Noah took away the covering God had given because he lost consciousness after drinking wine. It shows the negative qualities of alcohol, that is making one lose all inhibitions and make them do things they would not do while sober. That alone would not have caused much harm but one of the sons saw him in that state and what he did led to further disasters. "Ham, father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside" (Gen 9, 22). But, the other two sons did not act the way Ham did. "Shem and Japheth took a cloak and they both put it over their shoulders, and walking backwards, covered their father's nakedness; they kept their faces turned away, and they did not look at their father naked" (Gen 9, 23).

There started division among the three brothers. On the one side there was Ham who saw his father's nakedness and talked about it, in an attempt to humiliate him. The other two brothers' acted with more dignity and respect; they did not look at the nakedness of their father but covered him. God had purified the earth of all evil but evil shows its ugly head again and that through the chosen, holy person, Noah. Without being aware of what he was doing, he took away his clothes. The Devil who tempted the first parents listing the qualities of the forbidden fruit reappeared with the sweetness of alcohol.

When he became sober, Noah came to know what had happened. "When Noah awoke from his stupor he learned what his youngest son had done to him, and said: Accursed be Canaan,

he shall be his brothers' meanest slave. He added: Blessed be Yahweh, God of Shem, let Canaan be his slave!" (Gen 9, 24-26). What an apparent contradiction. The one, who was called to be a blessing for the coming generations, now cursed his own son. Who was to blame for the whole thing? The father who became drunk to the point of doing wrong or the son who saw it and communicated the same to his brothers? There are also other contradictions. It was Ham who wronged his father but Noah cursed Canaan. What is the relationship between Ham and Canaan? In the list of genealogy, Ham was the second but in this description he appears to be the youngest one. Blessing the older ones and cursing the younger one is not common in the Bible. The blessing given to Shem and Japheth also raises some questions. Japheth would stay in the tent of Shem. "May God make space for Japheth, may he live in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his slave!" (Gen 9, 27). The younger son would serve the older ones. The father creates a system in which the brother becomes the slave of his brothers. Two sons are protected while the third one is made a slave. Who are these brothers? What is the message being communicated through these incidents?

Noah failed, before God and before men. Instead of being the source of blessing he became the source of curse. The Devil who appeared in the Paradise again appeared in a family of holy people and created conflict. Two things deserve special attention here. Wine is the root cause of fall and curse. Again wine and nudity are related and they have deep meaning in the Bible.

There are two different views about wine in the Bible. First of all it is a gift from God to give joy and consolation to people while they are struggling with all the difficulties on this earth. It was invented by Noah whose name means giver of consolation. The Psalmist affirms that it is a gift from God as Ps. 104, 15, while listing the blessings from Yahweh says that God has given

“wine to cheer people’s hearts”. Wine was a common drink for the ordinary people and having plenty of it was a sign of God’s blessing (Hos 2,8; Joel 2,19).

Plenty of wine was among the Messianic gift: “Binding his foal to the vine and his ass’s colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes” (Gn 49,11); “And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine” (Joel 3,18). Wine was a necessary element for banquets and that is why running out of wine during the wedding at Cana became such a critical problem and it was solved by Jesus by turning water into wine (Jn 2,1-11). Jesus used the parable of the new wine to teach about the newness of the Kingdom of God (Mt 9,17). St. Paul exhorted Timothy: “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments” (1Tim 5, 23). In the Old Testament wine was an essential part of sacrifices. Jesus instituted the new Covenant by turning wine into His own blood. Two essential elements for the Holy Eucharist are bread and wine. Thus we can see many good things about wine in the Bible.

However, wine is subjected also to severe criticism in the Bible. The fall of Lot was caused mainly by wine. Jacob was forced to accept Lea as his wife because he was drunk with wine (Gen 29, 22-25). Holofernes lost his head due to drinking too much wine (Jdt 13, 2). According to Proverb: “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler; and whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Prov.20,1), makes man poor ... (Prov 21, 17) and invite misery... (Prov 23, 29-30). It should be given to a dying person to give some relief from pain (Pr 31, 6-7). Wine destroys clarity of mind ... (Hos 4, 11). St. Paul instructs that one should not become drunk with wine (Eph 5, 18). Drunkards will not enter the Kingdom of God (1 Cor 6, 10).

Noah, the only innocent and holy person of his generation,

miserably failed because of wine. If this could happen to such a holy person, what will be the story of ordinary people? We can see the answer to this in our homes and streets. How many families have been ruined by alcohol! The destructive effects of drinking are obvious but the teaching of the Bible goes even deeper.

Nudity is the problem that marked a turning point in the story of Noah. Son of Noah, Ham saw his father's nakedness and spoke about it, a thing that caused him to be cursed. But the Father curses not Ham but Canaan. This gives an indication to the core message of the story. Israelites settled in the Promised Land, regressed into idol worship and other immoral activities by the influence of the people of the land (Num 25, 1-6).

The Canaanites used to worship Baal and Asherah, the gods of fertility and prosperity. Their feasts celebrated on the mountains and other centers used to last all night and often ended up in drunken orgies. There were men and women (temple prostitutes) set apart to perform these rituals. The Israelites were tempted to take part in those celebrations. The accusation of Amos shows what happened during those celebrations. "They lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their god they drink wine bought with fines they imposed" (Amos 2, 8). Jeremiah's condemnation shows it was widely spread. "On every high hill and under every green tree you sprawled and played the whore" (Jer 2, 20). Prophets gave strong warnings against immoral activities under the influence of wine. The beginning of this can be seen in the curse of Noah. Even prophets and priests succumbed to such temptations. "These also reel with wine and stagger with strong drink; the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they are confused with wine, they stagger with strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in giving judgment. All tables are covered with filthy vomit; no place is clean" (Is 28, 7-8). It reached such a

point that the Lord lamented over it

The blessing given to Shem and Japheth and curse pronounced on Ham have still deeper meaning. These three sons of Noah are seen as the representatives of all the people in the world. The descendents of Shem are known as Semites. The Israelites belong to this group. The Indo European people or Arians are considered to be the descendents of Japheth. They came through the sea and settled in the South West of the Land. Philistines belonged to this group. Though Israelites and Philistines were constantly at war, they lived in the same Land. The meaning of the blessing of Noah, "May God make space for Japheth, may he live in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his slave!" (Gen 9, 27), can be seen in this.

There is a special implication in saying that the curse of Ham fell on Canaan. The inhabitants of Egypt and Canaan were considered as the descendents of Ham. The Israelites under Joshua entered Canaan. During the time of David all of Canaan came under Israel and the natives were made slaves. The process began by David was completed by his son, Solomon. The teaching that the curse fell on Canaan helped to demonstrate that the Israelites established dominion over Canaan with the blessing of God. So, the Canaanites became slaves according to the curse, according to the plan of God. The cause of the curse was that the son saw the nudity of the father. This refers to the immoral traffic connected with the worship of the Canaanites. Some zealous religious fanatics later used this curse on Ham to justify making the Africans, considered as children of Ham, slaves. This is also an example of an ideological use of Bible according to convenience.

Nudity and intoxication are still relevant subjects. God created sexuality for the welfare and continuation of the human race. But this beautiful gift is being misused in many ways. There

are people who use sexuality with a business mind and use it as a means to make money. Then there are others who get involved in sexual deviations such as child abuse, rape and homosexuality. Some would dare to abuse even their own children. Bible does not evaluate the merit and demerit of Noah cursing his son but it exhorts that abuse of alcohol would invite disaster. That might be the reason for depicting this episode in the Bible.

4 PHASES OF A FALL



LOT

“Abram went as Yahweh told him and Lot went with him”
(Gen 12, 4).

Lot had started off with his uncle Abram motivated by high ideals and goals but his life ended in utter failure. It did not happen all on a sudden. Step by step, the Bible describes how he fell from grace and ended up in total disaster. Chapters 12 to 19 of the Book of Genesis depict the incidents in the life of Lot that led to the point of procreating children from his own daughters, under the influence of alcohol. This episode contains many valuable lessons for all the coming generations.

They vividly depict what would happen if one ignores repeated warnings and signs from God and continues in the path of evil. The Bible presents such episodes not to entertain, but to impart important lessons and to exhort people to remain vigilant. Fall often occurs when one ignores repeated warning and signs along the way.

The Book of Genesis presents the background of Abram and Lot. “Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law the wife of Abram, and made them leave Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan. But on arrival in Haran they settled there” (Gen 11, 31). While in Haran, Terah died. It was after that, Abram received the call from God that marked the beginning of the Salvation history. Yahweh said to Abram, “Leave your country, your kindred and your father’s house for a country which I shall show you; and I shall make you a great nation, I shall bless you and make your name famous; you are to be a blessing! I shall bless those who bless you, and shall curse those who curse you, and all clans on earth will bless themselves by you” (Gen 12, 1-3).

Since Abraham was like a father to Lot, he took Lot with him. Besides his wife, only Lot accompanied him as Abraham set out on the journey, following the call from the Lord. Lot participated in all the activities of Abraham, they travelled together, prayed together and offered sacrifices together. The fraternity they shared was mutually enriching. Lot expected to share in the blessings Abraham was promised. The Bible does not say if Lot went with Abraham when he went to Egypt. However, the Essene monks wrote in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls that Lot, not only went with Abraham but while there, he accumulated much wealth and also a wife. There is reason to believe that this report is true because the discussion about the conflict between their shepherds happened after the trip to Egypt. Both Abraham and Lot had many sheep and shepherds.

“From Egypt Abram returned to the Negeb with his wife and all he possessed, and Lot with him. Abram was very rich in livestock, silver and gold... Lot, who was travelling with Abram, had flocks and cattle of his own, and tents too (Gen 13, 1-5).

Troubles started with wealth! “The land could not support both of them living together; for their possessions were so great that they could not live together” (Gen 13, 6). There was a conflict between the workers. The Bible does not say why they got into conflict. Anyway, the unity that existed between the masters was not shared by the servants. When the conflict turned into a more serious fight, Abraham took the initiative for reconciliation. “So Abram said to Lot, “Let’s not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers” (Gen 13. 8). The attitude of Abraham was directly opposite to Cain’s arrogance, “Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper? (Gen 4,9).

In order to preserve the good relationship, Abraham suggested that they part ways. He allowed Lot to choose the part he liked while dividing the land between them: “Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left”. If such an attitude existed among family members while making partitions, how many family conflicts and violence could be avoided! Without any second thought, Lot chose the fertile area that would help him to become wealthier. “Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company” (Gen 13, 10-11).

So Abraham and Lot parted ways and there started the down fall of Lot. Lot went away from his brother who was the heir of promises. Granted it was Abraham who suggested the separation but Lot could have made adjustments to live in peace. Attracted by the possibility of acquiring the fertile valley of Jordan, he forgot the past friendship and fraternal relationship; he did not care about the promise Abraham had received. He did not think of Abraham when he chose the better part. Lot no more cared about the welfare of Abraham, like the rich man in the parables (Lk 12, 16-21; 16, 19-31). The sacred author shows how wealth can make man blind and heartless.

Abraham and Lot parted because there were not enough fields to graze their live stock. However, in the next episode Lot is presented not as a rich shepherd but as a city dweller of Sodom and Gomorrah. How did it happen? Why did he separate from his brother? How did the shepherd become a city dweller? The sacred author points to an impending tragedy by saying: “Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD” (Gen 13, 13).

In the third episode, Lot appears as a prisoner of war. The kings came from the East and attacked the city of Sodom. “The four kings seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food; then they went away. They also carried off Abram’s nephew Lot and his possessions, since he was living in Sodom” (Gen 14, 11-12). Hearing this, Abraham set out with his servants and rescued Lot and his possessions. Though Lot did not care about him Abraham could not forget Lot and so set out to rescue him risking his own life. It shows his unselfish love for his brother. But, Lot did not seem to respond positively or express gratitude to Abraham, the brother who gives without counting.

In the he fourth episode Lot appears in connection with the

destruction of Sodom. Fed up by the wickedness of Sodom, God decided to destroy the city but before doing so visited Abraham through his angels. Abraham pleaded to save the city until God assured that He would not destroy the city if there were at least 10 just people (Gen 18, 16-33). The sacred author, through the description of the visit of the strangers to the city, demonstrates how wicked the city was.

Lot was sitting at the gate. Without knowing who it was, he received the Angels as guests in his house. It shows that there was still some goodness left in Lot. Though he did not submit totally to the evils of the city, he was unable to influence anyone in the city, not even the men who were going to marry his daughters. "Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, "Hurry and get out of this place, because the LORD is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought he was joking" (Gen 19, 14).

Lot felt helpless before the city people who became violent with their passion and evil desire. He was willing to give his own daughters to the city dwellers who came to abuse the strangers. However, the angels saved him from such a disaster, when the people who came to attack the house of Lot were made blind. Apparently the whole city had become blind. They lost sight of God's plan and became blind to moral laws. The angels who came to inspect and evaluate the situation got more than enough proof to justify the destruction of the city.

Though Lot knew that the city had become evil, he did not want to leave the comforts it provided. The Angels had to pull him out by force. "With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished." When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the

city, for the LORD was merciful to them. As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, “Flee for your lives! Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!” (Gen 19, 15-17). Lot’s reluctance to leave the city shows that it is difficult to abandon habitual ways even when one realizes they are harmful or evil. Lot made all kinds of excuses not to leave the city and finally forced the angels to give him consent to go and live in another city (Gen 19, 17-21).

Lot and family left the city with much reluctance. This half hearted departure is depicted in the fifth scene of the tragic drama of Lot. All that they accumulated; all that they valued were consumed by fire. The wife of Lot could not resist the temptation to look back. “But Lot’s wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt” (Gen 19, 26). Those who visit the Dead Sea area can see a pillar of rock in the shape of a woman, on a mountain at some distance. The travel guides would point to this rock formation with the explanation: look there stands Lot’s wife, who looked back! Temptation to turn back to the old situation is strong and that could prove to be dangerous. It could be any bad habit or forsaken ways.

With the last and sixth scene, the drama of Lot reaches its anticlimax as well as end. Though he had secured permission to go to the city of Zoar, we see Lot with his daughters in a cave on the mountain. Finally the decision is taken out of his hands and the daughters take the initiatives to accomplish what they want. Lot was drunk and totally out of his mind, not knowing what he was doing and why. He was not aware of what was happening to him.

The daughters planned a strategy to provide continuation of their father’s family. “One day the older daughter said to the younger, “Our father is old, and there is no man around here to

lie with us, as is the custom all over the earth. Let's get our father to drink wine and then lie with him and preserve our family line through our father." That night they got their father to drink wine, and the older daughter went in and lay with him. He was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up... So they got their father to drink wine that night also, and the younger daughter went and lay with him. Again he was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up" (Gn 19, 31-35). With this episode, Lot disappears from history.

Lot had become so blind that he did not know what he was doing or what was happening to him. He seems to have lost control of his actions as if he was gripped by some evil power. Noah had become so drunk that he lay in his tent with no clothes on. Lot, fell even deeper by becoming so drunk to generate children from his own daughters.

Various interpretations are given to the actions of Lot's daughters. Some suggest that a primitive story that existed in Mesopotamia was affixed as conclusion to the story of Lot by the Yahwist (J) author. By saying that "there is no man around here to lie with us" the author not only justifies the daughters, but praises their courage and sacrifice to preserve the family tree.

Another interpretation is based on the name the daughters of Lot gave to their sons. The literal meaning of the word "Moab" (Min-Abi) is born from my father while "Ammon" (Ben-ami) means son of my father's tribe. This etymological interpretation is given a further clarification. Some consider that the tribes of Moab and Ammon used this story to claim that they have pure blood and uphold the glory of their origin - they are not polluted by any foreign blood; it is the very blood of their tribal ancestor that flows in their veins. Other interpreters see this as a story fabricated by the Israelites to ridicule their

lifelong enemies, the Moabites and Ammonites. Regardless of the historical value of the story, the Bible recorded that God blessed those children giving each one a nation in his own name. It is emphatically stated that God loves them and protects their inheritance: “The LORD said to me, “Today you are to pass by the region of Moab at Ar. When you come to the Ammonites, do not harass them or provoke them to war, for I will not give you possession of any land belonging to the Ammonites. I have given it as a possession to the descendants of Lot” (Deut 2, 17 – 19).

What is relevant here is not the explanation or interpretation but the fact that this incident is presented as the last episode in the life of Lot. There is a great lesson to be learned from the way Lot failed to follow the plan of God for him. Step by step he fell out of grace. It all began with his greed for wealth. He valued wealth more than fraternity and love of his brother. Attraction to the city made him settle in the middle of a society that wallowed in immorality. Circumstances could lead one to vice or virtue. Lot’s attraction to the city was so strong that he was reluctant to leave it even when it was about to be swallowed by fire. Becoming unconscious by intoxication, he fell to the bottom of the pit.

The story of Lot is presented in the Bible as an appendix to the life of the Father of faith, Abraham. This adds color to the heroic obedience and faith of Abraham when seen against the pathetic fall of Lot. After narrating both stories, the sacred author invites the readers to choose the path they wish to travel.

5

STUMBLING HIGHPRIEST



AARON

“The LORD said to Aaron, “Go into the desert to meet Moses.” So he met Moses at the mountain of God and kissed him”
(Ex 4, 27).

The Lord chose him for a holy and sacred mission. Aaron obeyed the command of God faithfully and became one of the highest ranking persons among the Israelites as he was destined to be the bridge between God and the people. He was entrusted with the responsibility of informing the people the command of God, teaching them the way of the Lord, offering their prayers and sacrifices to the Lord, asking forgiveness for their offences, doing atonement for their sins and blessing the people in the name of Yahweh. It was a unique and lofty call. First of

all he was asked to be the spokesman of Moses. Then he was entrusted with the task of a mediator who passed on to Pharaoh and the people the messages God communicated through Moses. He had the noble mission of working with Moses in leading the liberated people to the Promised Land. Aaron was blessed with a most unique opportunity.

Still he failed, not once but three times. The one who was called to lead the people in the path of the Lord made an idol and presented it to them as the god who liberated them from Egypt. Instead of opposing idol worship, he promoted it. Instead of directing the people in the ways of the Lord, he let them engage in wayward ways and improper behaviors. Instead of standing with Moses in leading the people he joined the people and turned against Moses. Instead of professing his faith in God and glorifying Yahweh, he sought his own glory. Finally, denied permission to enter the Promised Land, he died somewhere in the desert. The failures of the first High priest stand out as a warning to all, especially for those who have received a call to leadership.

Aaron was one of the three children of Amram and Jochebed. Miriam was his sister. Moses was the youngest of the three. Unlike Moses, Aaron was not destined to be thrown in the river (Ex 6, 20; 2, 4) because he was born earlier. Pharaoh became concerned about the strength of the Israelites and sought various ways to weaken them including genocide. “Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live” (Ex 1, 22). Apparently this law came into force after the birth of Aaron. He did not have to run away or wander in the desert like Mose.

When it was time to liberate Israel, Yahweh called Moses and entrusted him with the task of leading the people out of Egypt.

Moses tried to evade the call listing his limitations including lack of ability to speak, but God promised to give his elder brother as the spokesperson for him. The Lord said to Moses, "What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you and you shall serve as God for him" (Ex 4, 14-16). As directed by the Lord, Aaron went to the desert and met Moses. For the liberation of the people God worked through Moses and Aaron. With great faith and dedication Aaron worked with Moses. It was Aaron who put the staff on the ground to be turned into a serpent and then stretched the staff over the waters to turn it into blood (Ex 7, 10-11. 19-20).

Thus he performed many signs and miracles while experiencing the power of God work in and through him (Ex 11, 10). When Moses and Aaron tried to liberate the people from Egypt, Pharaoh became furious and began to persecute the people more. The people accused the brothers for their miseries. But the two stood together and faced the opposition. Aaron was an equal partner with Moses in the liberation process because God spoke to them when they were together and entrusted the mission to them. When Aaron spoke, the people listened. God revealed His presence in the cloud (Ex 16, 10). It was Aaron who preserved Manna as a sign of God's providence (Ex 16, 33-34). A similar action is performed by the Catholic priests when they preserve the Holy Eucharist in the tabernacle. When the Amalekites attacked unexpectedly, Aaron entrusted the fighting to Joshua and went up the mountain to pray with Moses. He helped Moses to hold up his arms when they became weak. It was not only a physical action but symbolic gesture

that Aaron supported the arms of Moses that were raised to the Lord, and helped to remain raised. In short, he was always a support to Moses. In spite of all these, Aaron lost his fidelity and fell from the path of grace.

The Lord made a covenant with the people of Israel encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai. “And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD” (Ex 24, 4). He read the statutes of the covenant before the people who responded in unison: “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Ex 24, 7). Then the blood of the sacrificed animal was sprinkled on the Altar, the book of the Covenant and the people. Thus the Israelites became the chosen people of God, a priestly people and kingly people (Ex 19, 5). But, before that blood of the covenant dried on them they got tired of the Lord and His commandments and changed their mind. Aaron was partly responsible for their change of heart.

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.’ So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.... Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights” (Ex 24, 12-18). The people waited at the foot of the mountain with Aaron and Hur. They got tired of waiting for Moses and decided that they want to worship a god they can see and carry around in procession. They presented their demand before Aaron who moved into action quickly.

“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ Aaron said to

them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me" (Ex 32, 1-2).

Instead of discouraging the people from idol worship, Aaron joined them in the process of apostasy. He seems to have forgotten all that he had done with Moses. In a way he was more responsible than the people for what happened. "He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD" (Ex 32, 4-5). It was a festival that included eating, drinking and merry making, verging on orgy, like feasts of the Canaanites. The fact that Aaron took initiative for all these adds gravity to the crime as well as a warning for the future generations. Eventually the golden calf, Aaron made became the root cause of idol worship in Israel, the so called original sin of Israel. The sin of the first priest of Israel pulled the people into grave disaster. He became a symbol of scandal.

The fact that Aaron readily consented to the request of the people, cast the golden calf with their own gold, then allowed them to worship it and celebrate in a pagan model, was a serious offence that is still relevant today. Often it happens that religious leaders, who should guide the people to God, in the right path, encourage them to engage in devotional practices that deviate from true faith in God, with the intention of attracting crowds and making financial profits. They seem to forget that only God can perform miracles and it is God who hears the prayers offered through saints. By this, knowingly or unknowingly, attention is diverted from God to the saints and statues. Aaron is still living through such religious leaders.

The saints, who sacrificed their lives and were persecuted because of their faith in Jesus, should be imitated, not worshiped. Often their statues and the instruments used to torture them become objects of worship. Giving too much importance to the devotion to the saints, to the negligence of faith in God, is manipulation of popular belief and emotional piety. When intoxicated by alcohol and other drugs, people engage in processions and violent behaviors, we see that the message Bible teaches through the negative model of Aaron is still relevant.

It was no one but God Himself who told Moses about the unfaithful act of the people. “The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; . . . wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? . . . And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (Ex 32, 7-14).

In front of the people, Moses smashed to pieces the tablets of law God had given. It signified that the Covenant was broken. “As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it” (Ex 32, 19-20). Then Moses turned to Aaron, “Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?” And Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they

are bent on evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, take it off'; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!' (Ex 32, 21-24).

Aaron was not going to take any responsibility for the way he allowed the people to go wild. Moses made no accusation against Aaron but punished the people. "When Moses saw that the people were running wild... Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said 'Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.' The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day" (Ex 32, 25-28).

It is only just to ask why Moses punished the people while Aaron who encouraged them to commit such a crime was not punished. The same question comes up again when Miriam is punished and Aaron, guilty of the same crime is left free (Num 12). Maybe Moses respected the priesthood of his older brother or maybe, it was to teach the people that priests should be respected even when they fail in their responsibilities. In spite of Aaron's infidelity Moses anointed Aaron and his sons as priests, marking the beginning of priesthood in Israel. Moses did so according to the command of God (Lev 8-9). Priests are called to be holy but they too are subjected to human weaknesses, as all are the children of Adam. Hence they also need to be purified and the first sacrifice should be for the atonement of his own sins. "Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house" (Lv 16, 6).

The next time Aaron failed was in relationship to authority (Num 12, 1-16). Here also Aaron joined the people. People

often criticized and questioned the leadership of Moses. On such occasions Aaron used to remain supportive of Moses but this time there was split even among the three leaders. Miriam and Aaron joined hands against Moses. This was a serious threat. When his own brother and sister turned against Moses, his leadership and authority were endangered. The Bible does not say why such a serious conflict arose among them. Apparently it had something to do with the wife of Moses. “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married” (Num 12, 1).

Wife of Moses was the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian. After running away from Egypt Moses stayed with the priest of Midian. “Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage” (Ex 2, 21). There is no reason to believe that the Cushite woman refers to another wife. The adjective Cushite might have been used as a derogative term for Midian. Anyway, the problem was connected with a woman. Aaron and Miriam might have become jealous of the wife of Moses because she was respected and accepted as the wife of the leader.

The accusation was not against the woman but against Moses regarding a very decisive matter. They questioned the authority of Moses. “They said, “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” (Num 12, 2). God immediately responded to their attempt to overthrow Moses and take over the leadership by themselves (Nm 12, 4-8). God put an end to the dispute by placing Moses above all the prophets. “Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face - clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were

you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?”(Num 12, 6-8).

The Lord's anger flared against them and Miriam was punished. “Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous” (Num 12, 10). They both committed the same crime but only one was punished. The Bible does not say why only Miriam was punished. Just as the previous time, again Aaron was exempted from receiving the punishment. Who can question the ways of God? May be he was forgiven because he was chosen as a priest. But, Aaron must not consider it as his right. There are many followers of Aaron whose reputation remains intact only because God protected them. They too must remember the care and concern of God and remain humble as well as grateful.

In the third fall, Moses fell with Aaron and it was a fatal failure as it prevented them from entering the Promised Land. While wandering through the desert, the people suffered hunger and thirst and they murmured against Aaron and Moses. People were tired of years of wandering and longed for the Promised Land which did not seem to be anywhere near. So, naturally they complained against God but it was expressed towards Aaron and Moses. This time they were complaining for not having any water. God listened to their cry and gave them water.

Two incidents of giving water in the desert are depicted in the Bible. The first one was before reaching Mount Sinai (Ex 17, 1-7). The second one was after making the Sinai Covenant, during the forty years of wandering in the desert (Num 20, 1-13). It is not certain if they were two reports of the same incident or there were two separate incidents. Bible scholars think that the first one belongs to Yahwist (J) tradition and the second one to Priestly (P) tradition, of the same episode. Because the people mistrusted God, the place was called “Massa” which means test

and also “Meribah” which means fight with each other (Num 17, 7). By the term “water of Meribah” the sacred authors are referring to this incident. Only in the second incident we see Moses and Aaron being punished.

God commanded the leaders to give water to the people who were dying of thirst. “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock. So Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he had commanded him” (Nm 20, 7-9). So far Moses and Aaron did as the Lord commanded but then they lost sight of their position and did what was not pleasing to the Lord. “Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank” (Num 20, 10-11).

Moses and Aaron acted as if they were giving water for the people. They forgot that it was the Lord who gave them the power to act in His name. The Lord responded immediately. “But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and by which he showed his holiness” (Num 20, 12-13).

What did Moses and Aaron do to deserve such a severe punishment? There are two accusations against them. 1. They did not believe in the Lord. 2. They did not reveal the holiness of the Lord before the people. If we examine closely the way

they operated we shall see that both these accusations were true to the fact. God asked Moses to command the rock to give water but Moses struck the rock twice. This could be seen as a failure to trust in the word of the Lord. The second accusation was even more serious.

God was asking the leaders to respond to a just need of the people. God saw their suffering without water and had compassion on them. There was no reason to scold the people but Moses scolded them with anger. He began his action calling them rebels and asked if they should bring water out of the rock. "Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" Then he struck the rock twice, giving the impression that he knew where exactly the water was and it was by the force of his striking that the water gushed out.

They failed because they forgot that they were only the instruments in the hands of God. Instead of giving glory to God they glorified themselves. Here the words of St. Paul are relevant: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor 4, 7). God's glory is revealed in His love and mercy. The entire book of Exodus depicts the mercy of the Lord. Moses and Aaron had the responsibility to explain it and make it experiential for the people. Thus they should grow in the love and fidelity to God because the Lord chose the people of Israel as his own and made them a priestly and kingly people. The plan of God was that the people of Israel would proclaim the mercy of God to all the people in the world. Moses and Aaron were entrusted with the responsibility of forming this people for this lofty mission. But they, who were entrusted with such a noble task, sought their own glory and it was a grave sin. Hence the Lord did not allow them to enter the Promised Land.

Some might think that the punishment surpassed the crime.

What Moses and Aaron did was not a serious crime if we evaluate it objectively. But, the seriousness of the offense depended on the position of the one who committed the offense. They were the representatives of God entrusted with the responsibility of leading the people. They placed themselves in the place of God and that was a serious offense, just as what Adam did in the Paradise. Moses and Aaron died before entering the Promised Land. The task of leading the people to the Promised Land was entrusted to someone else. This would not mean that Moses and Aaron received eternal punishment. There is another lesson in this episode that one must quit the stage when one's role is over.

Aaron was the greatest and first priest of Israel. All the priests came from the family of Aaron who belonged to the tribe of Levi. But the priesthood of Aaron was not eternal. Jesus the eternal priest was born in the tribe of Judah and his sacrifice on the cross marked the completion of all the sacrifices of the Old Testament. With the sacrifice of Jesus all the previous sacrifices as well as the priesthood of Aaron came to an end; Jesus is known as the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 7-10).

Bible does not say that these changes took place because of the failures of Aaron. However by depicting them in the Bible, the sacred authors are teaching a valuable lesson and give serious warnings especially to those who are called to be leaders. Leading people astray would invite great disasters.

6 FATAL PIETY



JEPHTHAH

“Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow”

(Judg 11, 35).

Jephthah, presented in the book of Judges, (11, 1- 12, 7) is an unfortunate character who was forced to sacrifice his only daughter whom he loved more than his own life. He did not expect such a tragedy when he made the vow to sacrifice the first

person who comes out of the house, if he wins the war. But, his conscience obliged him to remain faithful to his vow. With great sorrow, he sacrificed his beloved daughter.

The king of the Ammonites prepared to attack Gilead. Being convinced that they did not have the capacity to withstand the Ammonites, the elders of Gilead sought the help of Jephthah whom they had rejected and driven out of his father's house. However Jephthah decided to use the opportunity to prove his merit and accepted the leadership of the army. Before the war, he prepared for a peaceful treaty with the Ammonites. The message Jephthah sent was a summary of the history of Israel. The message is presented here in detail (Judg 11, 12-27) to remind the leaders what the Lord had done for them. Jephthah told the Ammonites that it was the Lord who handed over the land of the Ammonites to the Israelites and the same Lord would help them to keep it. They had no right to wage war with Israel and if they start an unjust war, they will be fighting against no one but the Lord. The king of the Ammonites was not ready for a treaty and declared war against Israel.

Then he was guided by the Lord. . . “The spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering” (Judg 11, 29-31).

The Lord heard the prayer of Jephthah. “He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel” (Judg

11, 33). But the joy of the victory did not last long for a tragic incident awaited him at home. "Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her" (Judg 11, 34). What the girl did was something similar to what Miriam did when Israel crossed the Red Sea (Ex 15, 20-21). Songs and dance are part of victory celebration. The daughter came out to rejoice with her father, to thank the Lord and to congratulate him for the great victory Israel received through him, unaware of the vow he had made.

Jephthah was shocked to see his daughter at the door. He was heartbroken, thinking of the tragedy his vow caused him and his family. He had to tell the truth to his daughter who accepted it with courage and fidelity. "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow. She said to him, My father, if you have opened your mouth to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites" (Judg 11, 35-36). A daughter who desired nothing but the best for her father! She was willing to sacrifice her life to preserve the integrity of her father. All she requested was to give her some time with her friends to lament over her virginity. When she returned her father offered her as a holocaust (Judg 11, 37-40).

Why did Jephthah commit such a cruel act? How did the people of the time see sacrifice especially human sacrifice? What message is the Bible giving us by presenting such an incident? A deeper look into the situation of the time and the past life of Jephthah might help to answer these questions.

Jephthah was a son born to Gilead in a prostitute. The only

thing we know about his mother is that she was a prostitute. The other sons of Gilead kicked Jephthah out of his father's house. The society also refused to accept him and drove him out of the area. Thus thrown out of home and society, he ended up with a group of terrorists. Rejection from his own people made him grow with inferiority complex which made him angry and the fire of revenge consumed him. His friends added fuel to this fire of revenge and bitterness in him.

All these anger and bitterness was poured out on the elders of Gilead who came seeking his help to fight the Ammonites. "Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Are you not the very ones who rejected me and drove me out of my father's house? So why do you come to me now when you are in trouble?" When the elders humbly requested him his pride was awakened and he agreed to go with them if they would make him their leader. He took this as an opportunity to avenge the ones who insulted and drove him out. Hence winning the war became a matter of his personal pride and he valued it more than life.

Though the Spirit of the Lord empowered him, he was not sure if he would win the war. Since the negotiations for peace failed, he was forced to go to war. In this situation, it was important that he secure the help of the Lord. Because of his socio - religious back ground rooted in the religious convictions of the Canaanites, he believed in a God of justice and felt that he had to offer something very costly to please that God in return for the big favor he so desperately needed. He saw nothing improper in promising to make a human sacrifice.

Human sacrifice was the greatest sacrifice man could offer to God. In and around Canaan, the people used to offer human beings in sacrifice to their gods when they needed something great to accomplish. They believed that the gods will be pleased with such offerings. This attitude had influenced the Israelites

also. To overcome a national crisis, Ahaz, king of Judea, sacrificed his own son (2 Kings 16, 3). According to the Bible, the main cause of the fall of Samaria was their human sacrifices (2 Kings 17, 7). Manasse, the king Judea also sacrificed his son (2 Kings 21, 6). The warnings of the prophets demonstrate that human sacrifice was not that unusual in Israel. Some of the examples are given below. "They go on building the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire - which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind" (Jer 7, 31). "Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Mic 6, 7).

Influenced by such an erroneous attitude, Jephthah vowed to offer a human sacrifice to please the Lord and was convinced that he had an obligation to fulfill the vow he made. He was a deeply religious person, though his convictions were not in accordance with the true teachings of the Lord. Seeing misguided faith among the Jews, St. Paul said, "they have zeal for God, but it is not enlightened" (Rom 10, 2). The same could be said about Jephthah.

Since the time of Abraham, God has made it clear that He does not desire human sacrifice. Yahweh who asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son, at the last moment turned him away from executing that command saying, "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" (Gen 22, 12). All that the Lord wanted was faith that was demonstrated through total obedience. The prophets proclaimed again and again that the blessing is not granted according to the magnitude of the offering. The Lord has taught through the prophets what offering he desires from man: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD

require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6, 8).

Jephthah did not know this teaching of the Lord and so he did what he felt was needed (Judg 21, 25). It is, however, important to note that Jephthah felt bad and sad not because he had to sacrifice a human being. He felt heart broken only because it was his only daughter. That would imply he was ready to sacrifice someone else. He did not consider that life of every human being is equally valuable. Every person is dear to someone as a son, daughter, mother, father etc.

Jephthah is an example of misguided religious convictions and erroneous faith. He lived long before the teaching of Jesus that the Lord desires not sacrifice but kindness and mercy (Mt 9, 13) became known to all. Jephthah was not aware that it is a sin to kill a human being and that he has no power over life. One is not obliged to fulfill a vow that is beyond one's capacity. In the New Testament we see that Herod Antipas made the same mistake when he beheaded the head of John the Baptist to fulfill a promise he had made (Mk 6, 26).

Jephthah stands as a strong warning in the history of Salvation. No one must be killed in the name of religion or devotion. Unfortunately still innocent lives are sacrificed in the name of religious fervor. God is the loving father of all human beings regardless of cast and creed. He desires life to be preserved, valued and protected. Nothing else will be a more pleasing sacrifice to God.

7

BROKEN VOWS AND FALL OF A HERO



SAMSON

“But he did not know that the LORD had left him”
(Judg 16,20).

He was the strongest man Israel had ever seen. A son who was born by the special grace of the Lord! That life was set apart even before the birth for the service of the Lord, for liberating Israel from the domination of the Philistines. Filled with the Spirit of the Lord, he was invincible. All alone he could defeat an army of thousands. Such a fortress, such a stronghold lost all his power and was reduced into a laughing stock of the enemies. Finally, when he ended his life, he killed thousands with him. The Book of Judges, Chapters 13 to 16 depicts the life of this

strong man and his pathetic fall step by step.

Samson was born in unusual circumstances. His father, Manoah, belonged to the tribe of Dan. Wife of Manoah was barren but the couple believed in the Lord and continued to live in hope and prayer. Once the Angel of the Lord appeared to her and told about the child they were going to have. The Angel told her about the child, the nature of his mission, the way he has to live and how they should prepare themselves to receive him. “And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, “Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (Judg 13, 3-5). The mother was to keep herself pure, without drinking alcohol and touching anything impure, in preparation for the birth of the child (Judg 13, 8-14).

The word “Nazir” comes from the Hebrew word “Nazar” which means consecrate or set apart. Samson was set apart for the service of the Lord even before he was born. The parents called him Samson, a name that comes from the word “Shemesh” that means Sun. In this dark world he was expected to shine like the Sun. But this sun did not shine the way the parents hoped and its setting was pathetic. The one who was supposed to be light was submerged in darkness losing both his eyes. He ended up in the prison of the Philistines bound by the strongest chains and was forced to grind the grain by turning the millstone, like a donkey. The fall did not happen suddenly but over a period of time as a consequence of disobeying his parents and neglecting the regulations of the vocation he had received from the Lord.

Samson was born in the tribe of Dan, one of the smallest tribes of Israel. It was situated between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. They were neither able to occupy the whole land allotted to them nor could they keep what they had conquered. Finally they ended up under the dominion of the Philistines. God had entrusted Samson with the task of liberating his people from the Philistines, he was given also the power for that. The Bible tells us that he judged Israel for 20 years (Judg 16,31), but we are not told what that judging meant. Apart from a few stray episodes of chivalry, we do not see Samson doing anything important as far as the government of Israel or war against Philistines are concerned.

The activities as well as fall of Samson, as presented in the book of Judges, starts with his love affair with a woman from Philistia. According to the Bible it was the Lord who made it happen. "His father and mother did not know that this was from the LORD; for he was seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel" (Jdg 14, 4). That marriage ended up in disaster but gave an opportunity for Samson to kill many Philistines. One by one there were many massacres (Judg 14-15) and in every case Samson won as he was strengthened by the Spirit of the Lord (Judg 14, 6. 19; 15,14). The sacred author emphasized that Samson got the strength from the Lord.

Samson felt sad that he lost his wife. Seeking consolation he went to the house of a prostitute in Gaza. Guards waited to catch him but he escaped. "Then at midnight he rose up, took hold of the doors of the city gate and the two posts, pulled them up, bar and all, put them on his shoulders, and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron" (Judg 16, 3). This shows that he had extraordinary strength. But, he had a weakness for women and that led to his ruin.

Then he fell in love with another woman, Delilah. The meaning of the name is “devoted”, but it is not clear to whom she was devoted. The lords of the Philistines asked her to seduce him to reveal the secret of his strength and promised her great reward for her service. Three times Samson fooled her with false information but finally, tired of her continued nagging, he revealed the truth. He told her, “A razor has never come upon my head; for I have been a nazirite to God from my mother’s womb. If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me; I would become weak, and be like anyone else” (Judg 16, 17). Upon realizing that Samson told her the whole secret she invited the lords into her house; they came with the promised reward. She let him fall asleep in her lap and helped them to shave his head. The Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes, brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. He was imprisoned in the same city where he showed his strength by walking away with the city gate.

The Philistines offered sacrifice of thanksgiving to their god Dagon for being able to capture the mighty enemy. To celebrate the feast a huge crowd was gathered in the temple. For further amusement they brought Samson and asked him to dance. Samson’s inner eyes were open and he prayed ardently. “Lord GOD, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes” (Judg 16, 28). The Lord heard his prayer and he was able to use his power again. “He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life” (Judg 16, 30).

Samson’s life was an utter failure. He fell because he did not diligently follow the law of the Lord. Pride possessed him and he lived the way he pleased. Self discipline was foreign to his nature. He was totally blind to the precepts of the Lord until

he lost his physical eyes. He had to come to such a total disaster to see the reality. Analyzing the way Samson fell, we can learn some important lessons that are relevant also for today.

Samson knew that he was set apart for the Lord and had to live a life of holiness. He should not touch anything impure, must abstain from drinking alcohol, and should not cut his hair. As a Nazirite he was the soldier of the Lord and always be ready to go for war, the holy war led by the Lord. Samson did not consider these as serious obligations for him. He thought he would be safe as long as he keeps his hair and that was the secret he revealed to Delilah. He did not realize that the hair was only the external sign of his vows. He prayed only when he was desperate. Once he prayed when he was thirsty and the Lord gave him water (Judg 15, 18-19). Then he prayed at the last moment and the Lord heard his prayer (Judg 16, 28). All the other times he seems to have relied on his own strength. He killed a lion, broke the rope that bound him and walked away with the gate. As far as Samson was concerned, he accomplished all these by his own strength. He was convinced that he could escape from any danger and so he did not care about the laws.

Samson did not obey his parents but did what he wanted. He was told not to touch anything impure. The Book of Numbers depicts in detail the regulations a Nazirite must obey (Num 6, 1-21). One of the regulations was that he must not touch the dead. He ate the honey from the carcass of the lion he had killed before. With the jawbone of a donkey, he killed a thousand men. He was not supposed to have any contact with the pagans but he insisted on marrying a pagan woman. He thought nothing of visiting the Philistine brothels. He gave no thought to the fact that even before his birth he was set apart for a special, sacred mission. Even when he was captured and imprisoned, he did not repent and return to the Lord. At the last moment he pleaded to the Lord to give him strength not

because he was sorry for what he had done but to avenge those who blinded him.

By describing in detail the fall of a Nazirite, the Bible teaches certain lessons and at the same time gives some serious warnings. Just keeping the external signs without realizing and observing the spirit of the vow is like Samson keeping his locks intact. Those external signs alone will not save anyone. It is in baptism that a Christian makes the first commitment. Other sacraments repeat and intensify this initial commitment to the Lord. Taking a religious vows is an expression of this radical commitment. The example of Samson teaches that it is not enough to keep the external signs of vows or religious commitment. Those who neglect the little things would eventually end up in utter disaster as it happened to Samson. “But he did not know that the LORD had left him” (Judg 16, 20). This could happen to anyone and so we are asked to remain vigilant at all times.

Consecrated life is not limited to external signs. In a similar way, being proud of what we have or what we have accomplished could lead to great danger. One should remember that the Lord who called and gave all the talents and opportunities can withdraw them as well. Each one must remain faithful to the rules and regulations of the call he/she has received. It could be family life, religious life or priesthood. We have nothing that we have not received as a gratuitous gift from the Lord. Therefore, with gratitude and humility, we must obey the precepts and serve the Lord and His people using the blessings we have received. This is the lesson the Bible teaches by presenting the tragic story of Samson. First he lost his seven locks, the external sign of his Nazirite vow; then he lost his eyes, freedom and finally his very life. Samson crushed under the walls of the temple he pulled down on himself is a symbol that conveys a serious warning: the ones who breaks the vows are destroying their own lives and with that also the lives of many others.

8

PRIEST WITH DIM VISION



ELI

“When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died”

(1 Sam 4, 18).

This man lived between two eras in the history of Israel. The Country was in the process of moving from the period of Judges to that of monarchic rule. Eli had offered priestly service in Shiloh and judged Israel for forty years. His life is narrated in the first book of Samuel (1 Sam 1, 9 - 4, 18). Eli is the short form of “Eliyahoo” which means “My God is Yahweh”.

However, his life met with a tragic end. Upon examining the cause of his failures, we can find many warnings not only to the priests but also to all those who have any responsibility for bringing up children.

For the first time we see Eli outside the door of the Temple. “Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD” (1 Sam 1, 9). He met with his end at the same place (1 Sam 1, 18). He sat outside and observed everything but he did not understand anything. He heard everything but comprehended nothing. “At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see...” (1 Sam 3, 2). His sight was practically gone. “Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set, so that he could not see” (1 Sam 4, 15). The lack of vision referred not only to the physical sight but also to his state of mind. The sacred author pointed twice to the losing vision and so it has deeper implications. He lost not only physical vision but also the light of faith.

In the temple of the Lord, a woman came and poured out her sorrowful heart. Eli thought she was drunk. Apparently he could not recognize the difference between praying with tears and speaking under intoxication. It indicates that he had lost touch with the people. When Hannah was pouring out her heart to the Lord, Eli was sitting outside like a guard and judging, wrongly. He was indeed a priest with dim vision.

Here we see an apparent contradiction. The priest, who should be sensitive to the pains and sufferings of the people, misunderstands a sincere believer and tries to prevent her from crying out to the Lord, thinking she was drunk with wine. “So Eli said to her, ‘How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine’” (1 Sam 1, 14). Unfortunately he had lost the power of discernment that he could not distinguish deep sorrow from a state of intoxication.

However, there was still some sensitivity left in him as he was able to say a word of consolation when he realized that she was pouring out her heart to the Lord for not having a child. Hannah accepted his words as the message from the Lord and she was no more feeling sad. "Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer" (1 Sam 1, 17-18).

The word of consolation to Hannah became true; she was blessed with a son whom she called Samuel. As she had pledged her first born to the Lord, she brought him to the temple and entrusted the child in the care of the Priest Eli. Samuel grew up in the house of the Lord. He slept near the Ark of the Covenant while Eli slept in his room (1 Sam 3, 2-3). The sacred author pointed out that the eyesight of Eli was diminishing. Samuel was staying in closer proximity to the Lord than Eli. There is a hint that Samuel was "in" while Eli was "out". The next incident seems to show that Eli had difficulty not only to see but also to hear.

While sleeping Samuel heard someone calling him and he got up and went to Eli thinking it was the priest who called him. All Eli could say was that he had not called the boy and told him to go back to sleep. The call repeated a second time. Samuel could not recognize the voice of the Lord as he was hearing it for the first time. But as a person experienced in the ways of Lord, the priest must have recognized the call of the Lord. But, he who had dimmed vision and sight, physically and spiritually, failed to hear the Lord speaking (1 Sam 3, 1- 6) the first two times. When Samuel was called a third time, Eli realized that it must be the Lord and told Samuel how to respond. "Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall *say*, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening'" (1 Sam 3, 9).

Eli had failed to carry out his responsibilities in more than one way. His failure to bring up his children in the fear of the Lord was a fatal mistake. As they became adults they neither listened to their father nor cared about the laws of the Lord. The priests were to receive a part of the sacrificed animals. There were definite laws about it (Lev 7, 31-36; 2,3; 6, 26-29; 7,5-10, 14-18). The breast and right thigh were to be given to the priest. “The breast shall belong to Aaron and his sons. And the right thigh from your sacrifices of well-being... For I have taken the breast of the elevation offering, and the thigh that is offered, from the people of Israel, ... these the LORD commanded to be given them, when he anointed them, as a perpetual due from the people of Israel throughout their generations” (Lev 7,31-36). But the sons of Eli did not respect these laws. They sent servants and took by force what they wanted from the people. Their sins became grave in the eyes of the Lord (1 Sam 4, 12-17).

When any one in authority force the people to give more than they deserve they are acting like the sons of Eli. They might excuse themselves saying that it was not for them but for the institution, for construction, for celebration, for common use etc. Decadence and destruction of the house of Eli is a historical instant. But we see that it is still relevant today as we hear of news about the scandals caused by the people who are consecrated and dedicated to the service of the Lord.

The sins of the sons of Eli were not limited to the forceful appropriation of sacrificial meat. The Lord declared that He would no more tolerate the actions of Eli’s sons. After listing their crimes, the Lord pronounced the punishment he was about bestow upon the house of Eli. “Then the LORD said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to

punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them” (1 Sam 3, 11-13).

Due to the negligence of a father and arrogance of his sons, the family met with total extinction. It did not happen suddenly. Eli had received warnings from the Lord through the prophets but he failed to act upon them. “A man of God came to Eli and said to him, “Thus the LORD has said, ‘I revealed myself to the family of your ancestor in Egypt ... I gave to the family of your ancestor all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel. Why then look with greedy eye at my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?’ ... See, a time is coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your ancestor’s family, so that no one in your family will live to old age... The fate of your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you - both of them shall die on the same day...” (1 Sam 2, 27-36).

Through young Samuel, Eli was given more warnings. “I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever” (1 Sam 3, 12-14). Eli responded with total resignation. “It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him” (1 Sam 3, 18).

Finally it happened. When the Philistines attacked, the sons of Eli thought that they could win the war if the Ark of the Covenant was with them and so they took it to the battlefield of Aphek. But, the sons were killed and the Ark of the Covenant was taken by the Philistines. Hearing the news, Eli who was

still sitting at the door of the temple, fell back and died (1 Sam 4, 6-18). Even at the age of 98 Eli was sitting at the door. The disasters did not end here. Following the defeat at Aphek, Shiloh was destroyed. Shiloh became a symbol of what happens to those who rebel against the Lord. “Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel” (Jer 7, 13). Regarding the destruction of Jerusalem, in the 6th century B.C., the Lord said through Jeremiah, “I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth” (Jer 26, 6).

The Philistines soon returned the Ark to Israel (1 Sam 6). After keeping it in different locations, it was placed in Nob, what is today known as Mount Scopus, one and a half Km north east of Old Jerusalem, but part of the New Jerusalem. The priests who served there were the descendants of the family of Eli. During the time of Saul the priest was Ahia son of Ahitub, son of Phinehas, son of Eli (1 Sam 14, 3). Ahia’s brother Ahimelech was the High priest at Nob. “The king sent for the priest Ahimelech son of Ahitub and for all his father’s house, the priests who were at Nob; and all of them came to the king” (1 Sam 22, 11). Saul killed all the priests of Nob because they gave food for David and prayed for him, as David was running away from Saul (1 Sam 22, 1-19).

However one of the sons of Ahimelech, Abiathar escaped the mass murder and fled to David who offered to protect him from Saul (1 Sam 22, 20-23). Till the death of David he continued to serve as a priest. David also appointed another person from another family, Zadok, as a priest (2 Sam 8, 17). Soon after the death of David, Solomon removed Abiathar from priesthood and sent him to his native place, Anathoth, because he joined Adoniah to plot against Solomon. Thus what

the Lord said about the family of Eli was fulfilled. “The king said to the priest Abiathar, “Go to Anathoth, to your estate; for you deserve death. But I will not at this time put you to death, because you carried the ark of the Lord GOD before my father David, and because you shared in all the hardships my father endured.” So Solomon banished Abiathar from being priest to the LORD, thus fulfilling the word of the LORD that he had spoken concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh” (1 Kings 2, 26-27). Zadok was made High Priest and from him came the Sadducees, from whom the High Priests were selected in Jerusalem. This continued until A.D. 67, the Jerusalem war in which the city together with the temple was destroyed and Phinehas, the High Priest was expelled from his position. With that the priesthood in Israel came to an end.

What lesson are we to learn from this tragic story? Bible does not say that Eli committed any crime. Actually the ones who went against the law of the Lord were the sons. But the father is not acquitted because he did not do what he was supposed to do in time. So his sin was not of commission but of omission. He knew that his sons were committing various crimes but he did not correct them or control them. Eli failed to bring up the children in the ways of the Lord. Many things he did not see or understand and he closed his eyes and ears to many things. Hence his family was annihilated and the temple became a symbol of curse.

This is a great lesson to all those who are responsible for the formation of the young, such as parents, teachers, priests, political and religious leaders, law enforcement officers and elders of the society. If they do not carry out their responsibility well, they will have to give an account before the Lord for their negligence. The family of Eli was punished because he did not correct them even when he knew that his sons were doing wrong

(1 Sam 4, 13). This warning given by Samuel was repeated later through the prophets, “For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace” (Jer 6, 13-14).

When the leaders concentrate on their gain rather than the welfare of the society, they become responsible for the great disaster that would befall on the population. In B.C. 587, Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem, destroyed the walls of the city and burned down the Temple. The sacred author, who laments over the destruction, accuses the religious leaders who were responsible for guiding the people. “Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen oracles for you that are false and misleading” (Lam 2, 14).

The Lord gave the following message through Prophet Hosea, 150 years before the fall of Jerusalem. “Yet let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest... My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me... And it shall be like people, like priest; I will punish them for their ways, and repay them for their deeds” (Hos 4, 4-9). The people will be like the priests. That was the social analysis of Hosea. The priests and leaders are responsible for leading the people in the ways of Lord. When they fail to live a holy life, the society would fall into total destruction. When the political and religious leaders instigate intolerance, we see that peace in the world will become impossible.

In the contemporary society we see an increase of crimes such as sexual abuse, child abuse, financial manipulation, endless greed for accumulating wealth etc. To a great extend the failure

of the spiritual leaders to guide the people and to instill positive values in the society have contributed to the increase of social evil. Eli was a priest who miserably failed in his responsibility and consequently caused the extinction of his family. His story is narrated in the Bible not to judge him but present him as a warning for those in authority.

9

KING FALLEN FROM GRACE



SAUL

“So Saul took his own sword and fell upon it”

(1 Sam 31, 4).

Saul, son of Kish of the tribe of Benjamin was the first king of Israel and he ruled the kingdom for twenty years. The book of 1 Samuel Chapters 9-31 narrates the history of Saul in detail. More than 400 times the name of Saul appears in the Old Testament. Saul is a Hebrew name that means asked of (Yahweh). It would imply a gift from God. In fact he was a great gift God gave to His people of Israel. In response to their repeated requests he was anointed as their first king. He

was God's choice, "Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him; he said, "The LORD has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the LORD and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around" (1 Sam 10, 1).

The Lord confirmed the choice through signs (1 Sam 10, 2-16). Following the anointing, "God gave him another heart; ... and the spirit of God possessed him, and he fell into a prophetic frenzy along with them" (1 Sam 10, 9-10). Again the election was confirmed through lot in front of the people gathered in Mizpah (1 Sam 10, 17-27). He was the most handsome man in Israel and there was no one who was as tall as him (1 Sam 9, 2; 10, 23-24).

The people, who cried for a king, accepted Saul with open heart (1 Sam 10, 24). Before long Saul got an opportunity to prove his ability to defend the people and thus receive the approval of the people. With heroic action, he defeated the Ammonites and saved the people of Jabesh-Gilead who were under siege (1 Sam 11, 1-11). The surrounding countries came to know that there was a king in Israel. The people of Israel, filled with courage and self confidence, took pride in being the chosen people of Yahweh.

Saul was victorious in all the battles that followed. The disorganized people of Israel who were threatened by powerful enemies became a strong nation under the leadership of King Saul. He did not accumulate wealth for himself. Neither did he build palaces nor have many wives and concubines like other kings. He was an ideal, strong, courageous, unselfish leader. Yet he failed miserably. Step by step, the Bible depicts his down fall.

It was Samuel, the very person who anointed him as King that marked the beginning of Saul's fall. Saul never had any political ambition and never dreamed of becoming a king.

He was out searching for the lost donkey of his father, when Samuel announced that God has chosen him as King (1 Sam 9, 15-21). When the lot fell on him in Mizpah, he was hiding among baggage (1 Sam 10, 22). Samuel placed the crown on Saul but did not support him as a king. Samuel did not have an understanding mind towards Saul or stay with him at critical moments (1 Sam 10, 25). When Samuel withdrew his support, Saul lost his self confidence.

Realizing that a king in Israel was a threat to the supremacy of Philistines in the region, they prepared to attack Israel with a huge army. “The Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude; they came up and encamped at Michmash, to the east of Bethaven” (1 Sam 13, 5). To face such a huge army, all that Saul had was an unorganized crowd of peasants. “On the day of the battle neither sword nor spear was to be found in the possession of any of the people with Saul and Jonathan; but Saul and his son Jonathan had them.” (1Sam 13, 22). Before the battle began, Saul wanted to offer a sacrifice and receive the blessing of the Lord. He had expected Samuel to come and offer the sacrifice. Even after seven days, Samuel did not come. The army became restless and many started to desert. Seeing that waiting longer would be disastrous, Saul offered the sacrifice (1 Sam 13, 1-9).

As Saul was offering the sacrifice, Samuel arrived. He became furious and without bothering to listen to the justifications Saul listed, announced his punishment immediately. “Samuel said to Saul, “You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which he commanded you. The LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom will not continue; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have

not kept what the LORD commanded you” (1 Sam 13, 13-14). When the very person who had anointed and made him king of Israel now denounced him in front of the people, Saul became disheartened.

With mere 600 men he faced the huge army of the Philistines and the Lord granted him victory. However, Saul had lost his mental capacity to function with confidence. This is evident in the very presentation of the war: “Now Saul committed a very rash act on that day. He had laid an oath on the troops, saying, “Cursed be anyone who eats food before it is evening and I have been avenged on my enemies.” So none of the troops tasted food” (1 Sam 14, 24). When the men needed all their strength to fight he made a decision that would weaken them. Without being aware of his father's oath, Jonathan son of Saul tasted a bit of honey for which Saul got ready to kill him. It was the violent opposition of the army that saved Jonathan's life preventing Saul from committing such a crime. “Saul said, “God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan!” Then the people said to Saul, “Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great victory in Israel? Far from it! As the LORD lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground; for he has worked with God today.” So the people ransomed Jonathan, and he did not die” (1 Sam 14, 44-45).

Though Samuel had condemned Saul at Mizpah, he decided to give him one more chance to prove his fidelity and obedience (1 Sam 15, 1-9). Samuel told Saul to destroy the Amalekites and kill every living creature there. Saul defeated them but saved the best part and destroyed the rest. “Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed” (1 Sam 15, 9). Saul justified his action by saying that he spared them to sacrifice to the Lord but his explanation

was not acceptable to the Lord. Since Saul disobeyed the command of the Lord, he was punished immediately.

“The word of the LORD came to Samuel: “I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.” Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the LORD all night” (1 Sam 15, 10-11). The main accusation against Saul was that he moved away from the Lord. Disobedience was taken as a sign of that distancing. Though Samuel prayed for Saul all night, the Lord did not change his mind. The next day Samuel received evidence that justified the punishment on Saul. “Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul, and Samuel was told, “Saul went to Carmel, where he set up a monument for himself, and on returning he passed on down to Gilgal” (1 Sam 15, 12). Samuel met Saul in Gilgal and his guilt was established. Samuel declared that “obedience is better than sacrifice” and pronounced the final judgment. “For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king” (1 Sam 15, 23).

Though Saul confessed his sins and begged for forgiveness, Samuel only repeated the sentence twice (1 Sam 15, 24-28). The relationship between Samuel and Saul ended. “Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel” (1 Sam 15, 35). The first stage of Saul’s life as well as failure was over. Saul was made king with great hope but disobedience and selfish interest made him go astray. The failure was such that twice it was said that the Lord regretted making him king. His life continued in total failure and he acted as if he had lost the balance of his mind.

As directed by the Lord, Samuel anointed David as king of Israel (1 Sam 16, 1-13) and with that the Spirit of the Lord

departed from Saul. "Now the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him" (1 Sam 16, 14). The grace he received with the anointing was lost and the hint about the evil spirit points to his split personality or mental illness. The continuing life of Saul was intertwined with the life of David who was anointed in his place.

The split personality of Saul became evident in his relationship with David. It was to give consolation to the depressed mind of Saul that David was brought to the palace. David's music consoled his mind and helped to attain temporary healing. Saul loved David, respected him and appointed him as his body guard and commander of the army (1 Sam 16, 14-23). But, the victories of David disturbed Saul. Instead of considering them as the victory of Israel, Saul became jealous of him. When David killed Goliath, people of Israel rejoiced. "When David returned from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they made merry, "Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands" (1 Sam 18, 6-7). Saul became blind with jealousy. He feared that David would take over the kingship. Filled with jealousy, anger and inferiority complex, Saul saw David as an enemy. Thereafter Saul was preoccupied with only one thing and that was to eliminate David by all means.

Saul ended up being a pathetic king who feared his own body guard; he was a ruler who saw the head of his army as an enemy. Saul tried to kill David many times in many ways. Pretending to be in hallucination, Saul threw a spear at David but he stepped aside and so his life was spared. Hoping that the Philistines would kill him, Saul demanded 100 foreskins of Philistines as dowry for marrying his daughter, Michal. Saul was surprised when David succeeded to give him the foreskins (1 Sam 18, 25-

27). Next Saul gave order to kill David when he was sleeping with his wife but the timely and heroic intervention of Michal saved the life of David (1 Sam 19, 1-17). Saul was so possessed with the idea of destroying David that he killed the priest of Nob and his family only because he helped David who was running away (1 Sam 22, 6-19).

Saul concentrated all his attention and focused all his energy to chase David. Many times David proved his innocence and even Saul agreed to the same. “Blessed be you, my son David! You will do many things and will succeed in them” (1 Sam 26, 25). In the relationship between Saul and David, the last thing recorded in the Bible is this blessing. This final blessing shows that there was still some goodness left in Saul.

The tragic life of Saul came to a miserable end with the last battle on the hills of Gilboa. Since Saul had put all his energy into searching and killing David, he neglected the protection of the country. The Philistines gained strength and got ready to attack Israel. Saul neither had the army nor the presence of mind to wage a war but he was forced to fight the enemy. Before going for war, he tried to find the will of God but he got no response.

In desperation, Saul decided to consult Samuel whom he had loved like a father, who had anointed him as king and who used to reveal the will of God to him. Though Samuel had denounced him when he was alive, he hoped that in this difficult situation the master will not forsake him. To communicate with Samuel who had died years ago, Saul decided to seek the help of a medium in Endor (1 Sam 28, 3-25).

The message Saul received was totally devastating. There was no word of consolation but a warning that Saul and his sons would join Samuel the very next day. “The LORD will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines; and tomorrow

you and your sons shall be with me; the LORD will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines” (1 Sam 28, 19). Hearing the judgment, Saul fell unconscious. He woke up but was drained of all energy. Compelled by the woman who had helped to communicate with Samuel, Saul ate his last supper and returned home. Saul knew that he was nearing his end but he did not run away.

With a weak body and broken spirit, Saul faced the strong army of the Philistines who won an easy victory over Israel. Many from the army were killed, and among them were the three sons of Saul. Saul himself was mortally wounded. Not to fall into the hands of the enemy Saul ended his life on his own sword (1 Sam 31, 1-7). Thus what was foretold by Samuel became true. Kingship failed in Israel and the Philistines re-established dominion over them. Israel was again in the same situation as it was before Saul became the king.

Examining the failures of Saul would reveal the wrong steps he took. The first cause we see is that “the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul” (1 Sam 16, 14). When Samuel anointed Saul as king, he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord, received a new heart and he became a new man (1 Sam 10, 9-10). It was this Spirit that gave him strength to carry out the mission entrusted to him. But, over the years Saul forgot that he must function according to the directives of God. Under the circumstances, he forgot the law of the Lord and that it is the Lord who grants victory to him.

In the conflict between prudence and faith in obedience, Saul chose what was logical according to his own reasoning. He did not consider it as lack of faith and disobedience to the Lord. The second accusation against Saul was that he disobeyed the command of the Lord. When he set up a monument for himself, he failed to give glory to God. The victory he accomplished

over the Amalekites was considered as the victory of Saul, attained through his own power. Thus, through the repeated disobedience, the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul as it happened to Samson.

The final blow to Saul's life was caused by his obsession with fear and jealousy toward David. Saul had become so blind that he could not distinguish friend and foe. Forgetting all his responsibility as king to manage the administration of the kingdom and safeguard it from enemies, Saul spent all his energy to chase after David and to destroy him. Thus he endangered the very existence of the kingdom as well as his own life.

The Sacred author gives certain lessons and warnings by describing the failures of Saul. His life was an example for the teaching that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11, 6). Repeated disobediences and faults that are not taken seriously could lead to grave consequences. Though Saul had not desired kingship, once he became king, he considered it as his family inheritance that could be handed down to the future generations. Power and authority are gratuitous gifts of God and they should never be used as one's own private possession.

Jealousy and unfounded fear would make one blind to the reality of life and lead him/her to fear and animosity forcing one to commit violent and irrational actions. Ultimately it would cause the destruction of self. Saul who doubted his own body-guard could not trust anyone. One who repeatedly disobeys the commandments of the Lord will not be able to discern the will of God.

If we close our ears to the inner voice for a long time, we will not be able to hear that sound even if we wish to do so. That is what happened to Saul. For a long time he did not care for the will of God, but did what he wanted; at the end when he got scared of seeing the huge army of the Philistines, he began to

search for the will of God but he got no response (1 Sam 28, 6). Finally he took the fatal step of consulting a medium, an act explicitly forbidden by God and that brought down the final disaster.

If we do not discern the will of God that comes to us through normal channels such as prayer, Word of God, life situations and instructions of legitimate superiors, we would lose the capacity to discern the will of God forever. God and His voice would become alien to us and it would lead us to utter disaster as it happened to Saul. St. Paul gives us a standing warning, “if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall” (1Cor 10, 12).

10

MODEL OF REPENTANCE



DAVID

David said, "I have sinned against the Lord"
(2 Sam 12, 13).

Next to Moses, David is the name that appears most frequently in the Old Testament that is more than 800 times and 60 times in the New Testament. If Moses has played a decisive role in forming the people of Israel, David has played an equally important role in transforming that people into a powerful nation. Though the first king was Saul, it was David who laid the

foundation for a kingdom and a dynasty.

David has an important place not only in the history of Israel but also in the Salvation history because the long awaited Messiah was known as the son of David. He was an excellent musician and composed many psalms. God accepted him as his own son, blessed him and made him the greatest of all the kings of Israel. With a heart full of gratitude to Yahweh, David wrote, "He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you" (Ps 2, 7). God promised that the throne of David would last forever.

However, this great and glorious king terribly failed in his life twice and it caused much misery not only to him but also to the people of Israel. Unlike many others, upon realizing his failure, he was ready to acknowledge his sin and beg for mercy and pardon. Thus he became a model of repentance and forgiving love of God. The rise and fall of David is narrated in the following parts of the Bible: 1 Sam 16-31; 2 Sam 1-24; and 1 Kings 1-2. Forty two chapters of the Bible are set aside to present his personality and works.

David was the son of Jesse who lived in Bethlehem. Jesse was the son of Obed and grandson of Boas and Ruth (Ruth 4, 18-22). Thus David was related to Moab, a gentile country in the neighborhood of Israel. David was the 8th and the youngest son of Jesse. Even in the eyes of his father, he was not important. When Samuel asked to gather all his sons, Jesse called all of them except David who was in the field grazing the sheep (1 Sam 16, 10-12).

All the brothers of David were strong and handsome and while they were engaged in military service, he was put in charge of tending the sheep. The words of his brother reveal the opinion they held about him. Once Jesse sent David to the army camp to see how his brothers were doing. Seeing David in the

army camp, his eldest brother Eliab became angry and shouted at him, “Why have you come down? With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart; for you have come down just to see the battle” (1 Sam 17, 28). The brothers thought so little of their youngest brother but God loved him and chose him above all others and anointed him as the king of Israel (1 Sam 16, 13).

The life of David, after the anointing, can be divided into three parts. The first part starts with his appointment as the body guard of Saul and then as a fugitive in the wilderness and ends as a refugee among the Philistines. This period comes to an end with the death of Saul (1Sam 16-31). In the second phase we see David as the King, first of Judah alone and then of all the 12 tribes, of the entire people of Israel. This is a time of great blessings and constant growth in popularity and glory (2Sam 1-10). The third part that starts with the “Bathsheba affair” and ends with David’s death (2Sam 11-1K 2) and is a time of great temptations, falls, shame and disasters, but also of repentance, conversion and penance. There is much to learn from examining his life especially his fall and repentance.

David’s music provided some relief for the depression of Saul but he did not know that David had been anointed as king, because it was kept as a secret. When the Philistines insulted and challenged the God of Israel as well as the whole army asking if anyone would dare to come forward to fight the mighty Goliath, David took up the challenge. “David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied” (1 Sam 17, 45). The spirit of the Lord was with David and he believed in the power of the Lord to defeat the man who insulted the Almighty God.

David said to the Philistine, “This very day the LORD will

deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's and he will give you into our hand" (1 Sam 17, 46-47). So it happened that he killed the man with his sling and a stone. Thus, David proved that he was not only a talented musician but also a mighty warrior and Saul appointed him as his body guard and commander of his army.

When depression led to jealousy and fear, Saul saw David as his worst enemy and tried to eliminate him by all means. However, David did not see Saul as an enemy or make use of the opportunities he got to kill him. Neither did he hurt him in any way because David believed that raising his hand against the God's anointed was a grave sin and taught the same to his followers (1 Sam 24, 4-7; 26, 1-12). Thus David cultivated honor and submission to the king and to the royal throne not only in himself but among the people as well.

Many people, who were disappointed with Saul for one reason or other, went and joined David who had taken refuge in the cave of Adullam. "When his brothers and all his father's house heard of it, they went down there to him. Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him; and he became captain over them. Those who were with him numbered about four hundred" (1 Sam 22, 1-2). Abiathar who escaped the massacre in Nob became their priest and discerned the will of God for them. Thus David prepared himself for the rule of the kingdom and awaited the appropriate moment to start his reign. While staying in the midst of the Philistines, he plundered distant villages and distributed the same among the people of Judah

and thus earned the love and affection of his people. During the time of this forced exile into the Philistine territory, in every way David prepared for his future life as king of Israel. The Philistines were not aware of any of these facts.

During the second part of his life, David appears as an excellent politician, efficient warrior and effective leader. He believed that the twelve tribes must stay together and form a single nation. The mission the Lord entrusted to him was the unification of the tribes and formation of a strong kingdom. Every move he made was for this end. David killed the Amalekite who claimed to have killed Saul and brought the crown and armlet to him. It was to demonstrate that no one should raise a hand against the king, the anointed of the Lord.

The Amalekite who told David that he had killed Saul according to his own request, would have naturally expected a great reward because it was a popular knowledge that David had been fleeing for fear of Saul. But David decided that killing the anointed of the Lord under any circumstance was a crime deserving capital punishment. David did not see Saul as an enemy but as the anointed king. Hearing about the death of Saul and his beloved friend Jonathan, David mourned with a broken heart. The song of lamentation David composed was a proof of his grief that was visible to all (2 Sam 1, 19-27).

David's first attempt was to unify the twelve tribes of Israel. He knew that Judah, being his own tribe, would remain faithful to him. When he returned from self imposed exile, he did not reside in his own home town, Bethlehem. He chose to stay in Hebron where the tombs of the ancestors existed. This was a symbolic move that exhibited his affiliation to all the tribes. The people of Judah came and anointed him as King (2 Sam 2, 1-4). The Philistines had hung the bodies of Saul and his sons on the walls of Beth-Shan. The valiant people of Jabesh-Gilead

took the bodies and buried them in their home town (1 Sam 31, 8-13). David sent a message of reconciliation and warning to Jabesh-Gilead, "May you be blessed by the LORD, because you showed this loyalty to Saul your lord, and buried him! Now may the LORD show steadfast love and faithfulness to you! And I too will reward you because you have done this thing" (2 Sam 2, 5-6). The implied message was that David was grateful for the kindness they showed to Saul but Saul is no more and it would be better for them if they would support David now. On the other hand if they intend to oppose, then they will be dealt with accordingly. This is an example of the shrewd political moves of David that led to the unification of the 12 tribes.

After the death of Saul, his son Ishbaal ruled over Israel with the support of Abner, Captain of Saul's army. Only Judah continued to remain loyal to David. Constant war between Judah and Israel (2 Sam 2, 8-31) disturbed peace in both countries. There was a turn of events when Ishbaal rebuked Abner for sleeping with Saul's wife, Rispah. It was taken as a sign that Abner was plotting to establish a right to the throne by sleeping with the king's wife. Abner became angry and left Ishbaal and declared support to David and vowed to bring all of Israel under David. While he was returning after meeting David he was killed by Joab, Captain of David's army. Abner had killed Joab's brother Asahel and Joab was waiting for an opportunity to avenge for his brother's life. Besides Abner would have been a threat to Joab's position as commander of the army.

Hearing about the death of Abner David lamented and ordered those who were responsible for the murder to do penance by tearing their garments and mourning for the death of Abner (2 Sam 3, 29-39). After this, two servants of Ishbaal, son of Saul, killed their master and brought his head to David at Hebron, in hope they would be honored and rewarded, but David ordered them to be killed and to hang their hands and

legs near the pool of Hebron, as a sign of his own innocence in this plot, as well as a strong warning for anyone who would dare to commit such a crime. Again he composed a song of lamentation (2 Sam 4, 1-12). People, seeing that David had no part in those murders, anointed him a third time as king (2 Sam 5, 1-5). Thus David became king not only of Judah but of all the twelve tribes of Israel. He knew that any one tribe having special claim on him would affect the unity and solidarity of the nation and so he decided to move the capital from Hebron.

Jerusalem was a city that belonged to the Jebusites who were considered to be undefeatable. The city was situated between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin but none of the tribes of Israel had any particular claim for that land. In order to build his capital in a neutral area, David desired to build his headquarters in Jerusalem. Through clever strategic moves he captured the city and called it the city of David (2 Sam 5, 6-10) the capital of Israel to which all the tribes had equal access. Once the Ark of the Covenant was placed there, it became also the religious headquarters (2 Sam 6). Jerusalem became a city with unique importance, as political and religious center, for the centuries to come.

After establishing his capital, David began to expand his kingdom. By defeating the neighboring countries in war, he made treaties with them that would make them part of the kingdom. Under the leadership of David, all the tribes of Israel united to form a single nation, and through shrewd political and military action, a vast empire was formed. Israel, that was shattered with the death of Saul rose as a mighty empire comparable to Babylon and Egypt.

In all his victories, the Spirit of the Lord was with David. Now he desired to build a temple for the Lord who had blessed him so abundantly. However God did not allow him to build a

temple; but promised him through the prophet Nathan that God Himself would build a house for David, a royal dynasty, would make a covenant with him and establish his throne forever (2 Sam 7, 1-17). This promise was the beginning of prophecies about the Messiah. David was lost for words to express his joy and gratitude that he said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD; you have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come. May this be instruction for the people, O Lord GOD!" (2 Sam 18-19). This was the zenith of glory for David and also for Israel. No one, even David was aware of the fall that awaited him.

During the third phase of David's life, we see quite a different person, one who is caught up in the vortex of passion and sinks deeply into crime and violence. Like Samson who pulled down the temple building on himself and the Philistine crowd, killing them all, we see David pulling down, with his own hands, the mighty empire he had so painstakingly built up. It all began as a spark of passion that grew into a flame and finally became a wild fire that consumed David's family and the empire, splitting the people of Israel into two nations. This history of downfall is narrated in the book of 2 Samuel, chapters 11 to 24.

The troubles of David began in laziness. David decided to attack the Ammonites for insulting his envoys (2 Sam 10, 1-5). Joab led the army against the Ammonites and they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah, the capital city. Until now David used to lead the wars but this time he sent his army and stayed back in Jerusalem. In the afternoon after taking the siesta, he went up on the terrace for a walk and he saw a beautiful woman taking bath in some distance.

David enquired who it was and he was told that it was, "Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, and wife of Uriah the Hittite"

(2 Sam 11, 3). Eliam was one of the 37 heroes of David's army while his father Ahithophel was David's counselor. Uriah and his forefathers have served David faithfully. Though David knew that Bathsheba was a member of a family that served him for generations, without any qualms of conscience he sent for her. He slept with her and sent her back home. David thought that with his momentary gratification everything was over. But his calculations went wrong. His uncontrolled passion marked the beginning of his downfall.

David's careful planning began to falter creating more and more problems. "The woman conceived; and she sent a note to David, "I am pregnant"(2 Sam 11, 5). Next he tried to force Uriah to accept the paternity of the baby. He recalled Uriah from the war front and tried to send him to his wife. But, Uriah did not go home. May be he did not want to go to the woman who was defiled by another man, even though it was the king. Only David did not know that his royal secret had become a public knowledge. The neighbors and palace servants must have noticed the soldiers visiting Bathsheba and her coming to the palace and returning home. David did not know that a public person like the king can do nothing in absolute secret.

When David realized that Uriah did not go to his wife, he decided to eliminate him and so sent a message to Joab, the commander, through Uriah. Joab understood the mind of the king and sent Uriah to the front. In thick of the battle he withdrew the soldiers, leaving Uriah alone to be killed by the Ammonites. David lamented over the death of his faithful soldier and when the time of lamentation was over, decided to accept his widow as queen of the king. In the eye of the general public David was the most generous king who showed such kindness to a soldier's family. "But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD, and the LORD sent Nathan to David" (2 Sam 12, 1).

Confronting a king with an accusation was a dangerous task and so Nathan handled the problem tactfully. He approached the king with an episode of great injustice that has been done in the country, the story of the rich man who slaughtered the only sheep of his poor neighbor to prepare a dinner for his guest. "The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb... he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die" (2 Sam 1-5).

Unwittingly David judged himself. Only when Nathan directly applied the story to David's life he became aware of the trap and of the enormity of his crime. After explaining the way God raised him who was just a shepherd of his father's flocks to the glorious position of a great emperor, the verdict was pronounced. "You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun" (2 Sam 12, 9-12).

David was shocked as he came to a deep awareness of what he had done and what was going to happen to his family and to the empire. He had made great sacrifices to live a life of idealism and to build up the empire. All of a sudden everything was falling apart by what he did to gratify a momentary passion. David confronted the magnitude of his sin and was heartbroken. All

he could say was, “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Sam 12, 13). The merciful Lord who does not reject a broken hearted person forgave him and said through Nathan, “The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die” (2 Sam 12, 13). David’s life was spared but all the other punishments he had to endure.

David carried the burden of his sin for the rest of his life. Most of the Bible scholars agree that David composed Psalm 51 in a state of deep remorse and ardent prayer for mercy. In Psalm 51, we can hear the heart beat of a penitent. This is an inspiration for all those who repent over their sin. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions... Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight... Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities ... Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me... Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance” (Ps 51, 1-14).

A wife was taken by force and her husband was murdered. This was a great sin in the eyes of God. The center of the problem is that David forgot the Lord who raised him to the high position from a very low state. “Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight?” (2 Sam 12, 9). This, points to the depth of the matter, forgetting God and what He has done for him. All that David could do was pray for mercy.

David became physically and mentally weak by the weight of his guilt. He lost the moral power before his own children and people. He could not see their faults and give the necessary corrections. The result was fatal to all. Competition, animosity and jealousy grew among the children born of different wives. One son, Amnon raped his half sister, Tamar, and sent her out

into the street with torn clothes (2 Sam 13, 1-22). In fact it was David who sent her to Amnon. David became angry but did not, or could not discipline his son.

Absalom, Brother of Tamar suppressed his anger and waited for an opportunity to strike back. It was again David, who sent Amnon to take part in the feast arranged by Absalom (2 Sam 13, 23-38). During the feast Absalom told his servants to strike down Amnon. Again David could do nothing but lament over the loss of his eldest son whom he loved dearly. Absalom ran away but through the mediation of Joab, he came back. David did not know that his son had turned the people against him. He did not know that some of the soldiers, and even his own trusted counselor had joined Absalom. King David had become that distant from the people and the administration of the kingdom. Finally when the revolt broke out in Hebron, David could do nothing but flee (2 Sam 14-15).

David ran away, fearing his own son. The general public on the way showered insults on him (2 Sam 16, 5-14). Shimei, a man from the family of Saul came out cursing him but David suffered it silently. However, later David asked Solomon to take action against Shimei (1 Kgs 2, 8-9). Following the advice of Ahithophel who was once a faithful counselor of David, Absalom went into the concubines of David in front of all the people of Israel and established his right for the throne (2 Sam 16,15-23). The revolt came to an end only with the death of Absalom. Though David had asked to spare his life, Joab thought better of it and killed him while he was caught by the hair, hanging from a tree (2 Sam 18, 14). "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son! (2 Sam 18, 33). The cry of David awakened not sympathy but disgust among the soldiers.

The revolution was subdued and David returned to the

palace. All the tribes except Judah turned against David under the leadership of Sheba. With much effort, Joab suppressed the uprising. However, the unity of the nation was crumbling from inside. Towards the end of his life David committed another crime. The people of God were not to be counted but David ordered to have a census taken (2 Sam 24). Later he became aware of his sin, repented and implored for forgiveness. He was forgiven but the punishment was not withdrawn; seventy thousand people died in three days (2 Sam 24, 10-17).

Now David was old and in death bed but his troubles were not over. Realizing that the king was about to die, the eldest of the remaining sons, Adonijah with the support of Joab, commander of the army and Abiathar, the High priest, declared himself king. Prophet Nathan through Bathsheba reminded David about his promise to make Solomon king. David became active and immediately took steps to anoint Solomon as king and proclaimed the same throughout the nation. By the time this conflict was over, Adonijah and Joab were killed and Abiathar was exiled. With this ended the active life of David and Solomon took over the rule of the country.

The fall of David began with a wrong desire. Desire became passion and that passion consumed everything, pride, family and the nation. All that happened because he acted forgetting the Lord for a moment. The King's action affected not only the king but his entire family and even the country. One son raped his daughter; another son abused ten of his concubines in public; three of his sons were killed by their own brothers; the country was pushed into internal conflict and finally after the time of Solomon the country was split into two. All these show the importance of self-control and self-discipline.

Another lesson given by this is the disaster invited by exhibition. It was the exposed beauty of a woman that marked

the beginning of this fall. Those who exhibit their body or seduce another must be aware of the ramifications it might bring about. It is true Bathsheba was not exposing herself to allure David; but unfortunately that is what happened. This tragedy draws attention to the need of constant watchfulness and self control as well as to the need of modesty in all what one does. There are business people who use human body to make money by exposing it in a provocative way. Sexual abuse has become an everyday occurrence. It is important that we remember the warning given by Jesus. "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Mt 18, 6).

God created man and woman to be suitable companions to each other by supporting and loving each other till the end of their lives and producing children to fill the earth with the glory of God (Gen 1, 26-30; 2, 18). When the sacred author wrote about the creation of humanity, emphasizing the need of monogamy he had the example of David and many other kings before his eyes. It is also possible that the story of David and Solomon as well as their polygamy is narrated in order to draw attention to the dangers of polygamy and uncontrolled sexual passion. David had seven wives (2 Sam 3, 2-5) and many concubines, whereas Solomon "had seven hundred wives of royal rank and three hundred concubines. When Solomon grew old his wives swayed his heart to other gods; and his heart was not wholly with Yahweh his God as his father David's had been" (1Kings 11,3-4). Conflict among the children of David, born from various wives, destroyed the family unity. They fought each other with jealousy, lust and animosity.

Parents and other authorities must bring up children with positive values and good discipline. For this, the children would need to be corrected when they make mistakes and punish if

necessary. If they fail to do so, the end result will be the same as that happened to the family of David. In order to discipline the children, parents must follow the positive values. Good example is more valuable than many words. Parents who have made mistakes would lose moral power to correct their children. Those who are habitual drinkers cannot tell children not to take alcohol. High officials who make millions through crooked ways have no right to discipline the employees for taking small bribes.

Repentance is the greatest lesson David teaches. David recognized that he sinned against the Lord. He confessed his sins and asked God for forgiveness. He prayed that the Lord will not cast him out of His sight or from His mercy. He trusted in the forgiving love of God. A careful study of the life of David would show that God desires not the death of the sinner but their return to Him. We can have hope because Jesus has said, “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk 15, 7).

11 DISASTER CAUSED BY HATRED



ABSALOM

*“Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar”
(2 Sam 13, 22).*

Absalom was the son born to David from his wife Maacah, daughter of King Talmi of Geshur. According to the biblical account Absalom was the most beautiful man in Israel. His hair was so thick and plenty that it had to be cut once a year because of its weight. The hair that was cut off weighed two hundred shekels by the king’s weight (2 Sam 14, 25-26), that is approximately two kilos. His name meant “Father is Shalom or Shalom’s father”. But, his life was anything but peaceful. He neither had peace nor did he allow others to live in peace. He

killed his brother through deception. He was a tragic character who started revolt against his father and brought Israel to the brink of division. His life is presented in 2 Samuel Chapters 3, 2-5 and 13 to 18.

The tragic history began in the inner sanctum of the King's palace where David's many wives and their children lived. "Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her" (2 Sam 13, 1). Beauty of Tamar led to family conflict. To satisfy his lust, Amnon used a trick suggested by his friend, Jonadab. Amnon pretended to be ill and insisted that he would get well only if he eats the food prepared by his sister, Tamar. Without considering the ramifications, David sent Tamar to Amnon's room. Tamar tried to dissuade Amnon in various ways but he did not heed to her plea. "No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you." But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her" (2 Sam 13, 12-14). After doing what he wanted of her, threw her out and closed the door. What Amnon felt toward Tamar was not love but lust, cruel lust that destroys human beings.

Tamar tore her clothes as a sign that she had lost her virginity and walked through the street crying out loud. Absalom met his sister in this heart breaking condition and was furious but kept quiet until the opportune moment. His mind was like a smoking volcano. Absalom consoled her and made her stay with him. David heard about the incident but did nothing to reprimand or punish Amnon (2 Sam 13, 15-22), in fact he had lost his moral power over his children because of what he had done to Bathsheba.

Absalom waited two years to act. By then most people might have forgotten the Tamar incident or considered it as an unfortunate occurrence. Amnon did not seem to have had any second thought regarding the cruel game he played with Tamar. However, Absalom could not forget the pain of his sister who stayed with him without any possibility of a marriage and future.

Absalom carefully orchestrated a plan. He invited the king and all his sons for sheep shearing at Baal-hazor. David did not go but allowed his sons to attend the function. As planned earlier, the servants of Absalom killed Amnon after making him drunk with wine (2 Sam 13, 23-29). Fearing the wrath of David, Absalom took refuge with his grandfather, the king of Geshur and stayed there for three years (2 Sam 30-38).

When David overcame his sorrow over the death of Amnon, he longed to see Absalom (2 Sam 13, 38). Realizing the desire of David, Joab made clever plans to bring Absalom back. With the help of a good actress from Tekoa, Joab secured permission to let Absalom come back to his house (2 Sam 14, 1-27). However, two more years passed before David allowed Absalom to come to meet him and when they met, David said nothing about the crime Absalom committed but welcomed him with open heart. "So he came to the king and prostrated himself with his face to the ground before the king; and the king kissed Absalom" (2 Sam 14, 33).

Absalom's ultimate aim was to become the king of Israel and for this purpose he made strategic moves to gain popular support. He would meet any one coming to the king and tell them that he could have helped them if he was the king. "Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the road to the gate of the palace; and when anyone brought a suit before the king for judgment, Absalom would call out and say, "From what city are you?" When the person said, "Your servant is of such and

such a tribe in Israel, “Absalom would say, “See, your claims are good and right; but there is no one deputed by the king to hear you.” Absalom said moreover, “If only I were judge in the land! Then all who had a suit or cause might come to me, and I would give them justice” (2 Sam 15, 2-4). Slowly Absalom became the beloved of the people.

David was not aware of all that was happening in and around the palace. When Absalom asked permission to go to Hebron, David sent him off with his blessings (2 Sam 15, 7-9). Apparently David forgot that he had begun his rule in Hebron. From Hebron, Absalom made the final arrangements to take over the throne. David’s Counselor, Ahithophel the Gilonite supported Absalom. Messengers were sent all through the country. The conspiracy grew and Absalom gained support all through the land. When he had gained enough support, Absalom marched to Jerusalem with a huge army.

By the time David heard about the conspiracy, it was too late. He realized that the people’s heart had gone to Absalom, and so he decided to flee from the palace with his household except ten concubines whom he left to look after the house. David was forced to flee from the city he captured and made his capital, from the city of David and from the presence of the Ark of the Covenant. Covering his head, shedding tears, David went into the wilderness (2 Sam 15, 13 - 16, 14).

Without any resistance, Absalom took over Jerusalem. He entered the palace and publicly raped the ten concubines who were left in the house. “They pitched a tent for Absalom upon the roof; and Absalom went in to his father’s concubines in the sight of all Israel” (2 Sam 16, 22). It was a sign that he had taken over the throne. As far as Absalom was concerned, he got everything he wanted. He got the rule of the empire as he desired. But he did not know that this shameful act marked the

beginning of his downfall.

Absalom knew that he had to kill his father, to secure his throne. “Ahithophel said to Absalom, “Let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will set out and pursue David tonight. I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged, and throw him into a panic; and all the people who are with him will flee. I will strike down only the king, and I will bring all the people back to you as a bride comes home to her husband. You seek the life of only one man, and all the people will be at peace” (2 Sam 17, 1-3). Absalom decided to seek a second opinion from Hushai. “Then Hushai said to Absalom, . . . your father is expert in war; he will not spend the night with the troops . . . all Israel be gathered to you, from Dan to Beer-sheba, . . . and that you go to battle in person. So we shall come upon him in whatever place he may be found, and we shall light on him as the dew falls on the ground; and he will not survive, nor will any of those with him . . . Absalom and all the men of Israel said, “The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel” (2 Sam 17, 7-14). Absalom did not know that Hushai was a spy for David and that also was the plan of God. God’s blessing was not with Absalom as he did not act justly in occupying the throne.

Absalom led the war against David as counseled by Hushai. The people’s army of Absalom was no match for the well experienced warriors under Joab. The two sides met in the forest. Soon Absalom fell into the trap Joab had set for him. “Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on” (2 Sam 18, 9). Joab came upon him and killed him though David had ordered to spare the life of Absalom. His body was thrown into a pit and a pile of stone

heaped on top of his body. Thus, ended the life of Absalom!

Absalom was a handsome man and his sister Tamar was beautiful. Her beauty awakened lust in Amnon and thus marked the beginning of his downfall. Absalom's fate was sealed by his bountiful hair, the most significant part of his gorgeous appearance. Just as the saying goes, "all that glitters is not gold", all that appears to be good might not lead to lasting happiness. To a certain extent, David's imprudence and carelessness were the main cause of Absalom's fall. When Amnon abused Tamar and ruined her future, David did nothing to punish him. When the innocent suffered the guilty party went on enjoying life. This added fuel to the fire of Absalom's anger. It caused Absalom to take matters into his own hand to punish Amnon. However, Absalom did not know that hatred and animosity would solve no problem. No one taught him that. To instill that teaching in the human hearts, humanity had to wait another thousand years. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also" (Lk 6, 27-29).

Amnon could not control his passion and that was the cause of his fall. The attraction he felt toward beautiful Tamar was only natural, but it blinded him to the truth that the woman in question was his half sister and what he was about to commit was incest. Thus attraction aroused passion, lust took over his moral sensibility and finally Amnon became a slave to the dark forces in him that ultimately destroyed the family as well as the very kingdom. Emotion and passion give energy to man but if not controlled they could become disastrous as it happened in the case of Amnon. Emotions are aroused by what we see, hear and experience. Hence it is important that we discipline our senses and control our emotions through the use of reason and above all with the help of the Holy Spirit. Those who engage pornographic visions and talks would have a very difficult time

to control their emotions. Uncontrolled emotions were the cause of the downfall of David, Amnon and Absalom.

The ultimate cause of fall for Absalom was his ambition and greed. He was willing to commit any crime to get the crown. He had no qualms of conscience to abuse sexually the wives of his father. He was even ready to kill his father to secure his throne. Hunger for power made him blind to moral values and honest behavior. The heap of stones placed on top of Absalom's tomb stands as a warning to all, at all times.

12

FOLLY OF THE WISE MAN'S WISDOM



SOLOMON

“King Solomon loved many foreign women... Solomon clung to these in love... and his wives turned away his heart”
(1 Kings 11, 1-3).

Solomon was the wisest man of his time. “Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else...his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations” (1Kings 4, 30). It was God who gave him the endless wisdom and generous heart. “God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore” (1 Kings 4, 29). Four books in the Bible are known in his name: Wisdom; Song of Songs; Proverbs; and Ecclesiastics. Though

modern Bible Scholars do not consider that Solomon wrote these books, the Wisdom of Solomon has an important place in the Jewish-Christian tradition. Jesus presented Solomon as a man of great wisdom (Lk 11, 31).

The name of Solomon appears more than 300 times in the Old Testament and 12 times in the New Testament. In the Bible, eleven chapters (1 Kings 1-11) are set aside to narrate the deeds of Solomon. His name came from the Hebrew word, "Salom" which means peace and prosperity. The name "Slomo" in Hebrew became "Solomon" in English. The name was certainly suitable for him as during his time there was peace and great prosperity in Israel. He did not have to wage any war. In all appearance, it was the golden age of Israel.

However, the Bible does not hide his failures. His failures and their causes are presented in Chapter 11 of the first book of Kings. According to the sacred author the main cause of failure was that he did not remain faithful to the Lord. "His heart was not true to the LORD his God" (1 Kings 11, 4). What happened after the death of Solomon demonstrates the weakness of Solomon's rule. The people came to his son and successor, Rehoboam with a petition that reveals the oppressive nature of Solomon's rule that finally caused the split of the kingdom: "Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke upon us, and we will serve you." (1 Kings 12, 1-20)

Solomon became king through a political conspiracy in the royal Palace (1 Kings 1, 1-40). As David was aged and bedridden, without his knowledge, Adonijah, the eldest of the remaining sons, declared himself king. Joab, commander of the army and Abiathar, the High priest supported him. Nathan the court prophet encouraged Bathsheba to remind David about the promise he had given to make her son Solomon king. Nathan

supported her with additional information and warnings. When King David realized that Adonijah had proclaimed himself king and that would endanger the life of his beloved wife Bathsheba and her son, Solomon as well as his faithful servants, he moved into action. Solomon was proclaimed as king. Under the protection of the palace guards, Kerethites and Pelethites, the high priest Zadok and prophet Nathan took the holy oil kept in the temple and anointed Solomon as King. King David had Solomon ride his own mule. With that Solomon's succession was secured. The conspiracy of Adonijah failed and his followers fled the scene.

David was happy and thanked God that Solomon became king. Before dying David gave clear directives to secure his throne. He also told what to do with Joab who betrayed him and Shimei who insulted him. Special care was to be shown to Barzillai the Gileadite who was loyal to David at all times and helped him when he was in exile (1 Kings 2, 1-9).

Solomon followed the directions faithfully. Shimei was killed because he disobeyed the king. Joab took refuge in the tent of the Lord, near the altar. But he was struck down there. Adonijah was put to death because he asked to marry Abishag, the last concubine of David, a move that Solomon interpreted as the first step towards claiming the throne. Thus Solomon secured and established his rule, in the blood of his enemies.

Once God appeared to Solomon in a dream and asked him to request any blessing he wanted. Solomon asked, "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this, your great people?" (1 Kings 3, 9). The Hebrew word used here could be translated as a "listening heart". God was pleased with this request and promised him much more than what he asked for: "God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have

not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you” (1 Kings 3, 11-13). Besides wisdom, Solomon was promised wealth and fame. There was a condition placed on all these blessings: “If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life” (1 Kings 3, 14).

As the Lord had promised, Solomon became the wisest man in the world. His wisdom was evident in all that he did: his rule of the country, his judgments, executing justice in the land, organization of his army, construction enterprises, ship building, metallurgic and other industries, international trade by land and sea etc. He made peace treaties with the neighboring countries. Tributes from vassals and profit from trade poured into the country (I Kings 10, 4-22). Even though he signed peace treaties with the neighboring countries he kept a very powerful army and navy to meet any eventual threat. “Solomon gathered together chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem” (1 Kings 10, 26). The number of men in the army is not recorded.

The greatest accomplishment of Solomon was the construction of the Jerusalem Temple. Four chapters of the first book of Kings (1 Kings 5-8) are set aside to describe the construction of the temple. David had desired to construct a temple for the Lord but it was by Solomon that desire was fulfilled. The Temple built with Cedar and Cypress wood and covered with pure gold became a world wonder. The

celebrations of the dedication of the temple lasted for a week. When the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the holy of holies, the glory of the Lord filled the temple. “A cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” (1 Kings 8, 10-11). Solomon and the people saw it as a sign that the Lord has accepted the temple as his dwelling place. Jerusalem Temple became the religious center of Israel. “Solomon offered as sacrifices of well-being to the LORD twenty-two thousand oxen and one hundred twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the people of Israel dedicated the house of the LORD” (1 Kings 8, 63).

Solomon offered an ardent prayer to the Lord, professing his faith and thanking the Lord for his mercies in the past and for the days to come. He asked forgiveness for the sins of the past and future and pleaded for mercy for his people (1 Kings 8, 22-55). The prayer of Solomon and the blessing he pronounced was a witness to his faith and devotion. “He stood and blessed all the assembly of Israel with a loud voice: “Blessed be the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel according to all that he promised; ... Let these words of mine, with which I pleaded before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, and may he maintain the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel, as each day requires; so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other. Therefore devote yourselves completely to the LORD our God, walking in his statutes and keeping his commandments, as at this day” (1 Kings 8, 55-61).

The construction of the temple lasted seven years, but it took 13 years to build palaces for himself and his wives. Besides these, Solomon built cities and fortresses all over the country guaranteeing prosperity and security. Everything was constructed with the most precious timber and precious metal.

Wealth accumulated in great quantity in the headquarters and the royal household lived in immense luxury. All the vessels of the palace were made of gold.

Six books of the Bible, Joshua to 2 Kings are known as the Deuteronomistic history. This history of Israel was written in the light of the Babylonian captivity. Solomon's history had a special place in it as the people of Israel reached the zenith of glory during the time of Solomon. At the same time the sacred author points out that seeds of the fall were sown during his reign.

Until now the wisdom and glory of Solomon were presented. However, in them we can see the shadow of downfall. He did not obey the directives given in the book of Deuteronomy regarding the accumulation of wealth by the kings. "He must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the LORD has said to you, "You must never return that way again." And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests" (Deut 17, 16-18). But Solomon did not obey these laws. He had 12,000 horses and made more money importing horses from Egypt and exporting them to other countries. He also broke the law about wives as he had more than 700 wives and 300 concubines. Besides these he broke the law of silver and gold (1 Kings 10, 14-22). Thus regarding wealth and lifestyle, Solomon followed his own laws.

Solomon broke the law in accumulating wealth but the way he made them was even more corrupt. The expensive timber needed for the construction was imported from Lebanon. "Solomon in turn gave Hiram twenty thousand cores (1 core =

450 litter) of wheat as food for his household, and twenty cores of fine oil. Solomon gave this to Hiram year by year” (1 Kings 5, 11). Since that was not enough, 20 cities in the land of Galilee were given to the king of Tyre. But, Hiram of Tyre was still not satisfied as he did not like those cities (1 Kings 9, 10-14). There was something wrong with the way the money was found for his enormous needs; he did not hesitate even to sell the land

The method used for finding the manpower for the construction was still more oppressive. Slaves were used for the construction. Even when it was said that the Israelites were not made slaves (1 Kgs 9, 22), they were forced to serve as soldiers and perform other duties. One time, may be during the beginning of the rule of Solomon, “Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy” (1 Kings 4, 20). Later they were heavily taxed for the construction projects and luxuries of the palace. The people said to the son of Solomon, “Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us, and we will serve you” (1 Kings 12, 4).

It is significant to note the change in the attitude of the people when they said “we will serve you”. The people whom God had freed saying, “I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect” (Lev 26, 13), allowed themselves to be the servants of the king. The prosperity and splendor of the empire of Solomon was superficial. Behind the glorious facade there were majority of the people struggling with hard work and utter poverty to support the luxuries of the royal palace. The empire was like a smoking volcano and it could erupt any time. There were minor protests and rebellions as in the case of Hadad the Edomite and Jeroboam, the one Solomon put in charge of the forced labor (1 Kings 11, 14-40). The fact that prophets

encouraged such rebellion added fuel to the fire (1 Kings 11, 26-39).

Solomon was possessed by greed for wealth and fame. He was proud of his empire and wanted the world to know that he excelled in every field. Even more dangerous was his passion for gentile women. Most of the treaties he made with the neighboring countries involved a marriage contract. Through such a contract, he had married the daughter of the Pharaoh (1 Kgs 3, 1-3). Solomon did not respect the law that said that the king must not seek many wives (Lv 17, 17) as he had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11, 3). Many of these wives were gentile women and they turned his heart away from the Lord (1 Kings 11, 3). He built temples for the gods of his gentile wives and he joined them in worshipping them (1 Kings 11, 5-8). It is true that Solomon built a beautiful Temple for the Lord of Israel and offered sacrifices to the Lord. But, he also worshipped other gods and thus involved in idol worship. This is a sign that Solomon failed to remain faithful to the Lord. He did not walk in the ways of the Lord like his father, David (1 Kings 11, 5-6). All these had far reaching consequences in the history of Israel.

The Omnipotent God of Israel is present everywhere. Heaven and earth are filled with His presence. God of Abraham travelled with him. God, who liberated Israelites from the slavery of Egypt, walked before them. When the people lived in tents, God lived in their midst. But once the Temple was built and the Ark was placed in the holy of holies, people came to believe that the presence of God was limited to that place. To be in the presence of the Lord, they had to make pilgrimages and bring offerings. In short, God of Solomon lived in the temple as he lived in the palace.

With this centralization of worship, great changes took place in the religious attitude. They deviated from the concept

that what was pleasing to the Lord was a life according to the laws of the Covenant. Sacrifices, rituals and other religious practices began to take priority in their faith-life and with that the relationship between religious life and justice was lost. They began to think that God does not see the wickedness and corruption in the society. Some believed that they could do any injustice as long as they make offerings to the temple. Thus the difference between the God of the Covenant and the gentile gods disappeared. They made the Almighty God one of the many gods existed in the land.

Solomon distanced himself from the Lord who appeared to him twice and ordered him to remain faithful to Him and to the laws of the Covenant. The temple he built and the prayers he offered lost their meaning. God did not take away the throne from Solomon because of his father David who was faithful to the Lord. But in B.C. 931, the smoking volcano erupted! The fury of an oppressed people destroyed the empire. Israel was divided. Ten tribes broke off from the empire of David and established a Kingdom called Israel in the north; the other two tribes, namely Judah and Benjamin, in the south, came to be known as Judah. The unity established by David was destroyed forever.

According to the sacred author, the two main causes of the fall of Solomon were his unending greed for wealth and uncontrolled passion for women. Finally they led him to ultimate disaster. The wisdom he received from the Lord (1 Kings 4, 29) made him the wisest man that enabled him to compose thousands of Proverbs, explain riddles, excel in sciences and to become more famous than anyone else. But, he forgot that the knowledge of the Lord is the greatest knowledge of all. Hence he moved away from the source of true knowledge.

What are the lessons we can learn from the fall of this great

man? The most obvious lesson is that greed would misguide the person and lead to disaster. A knowledge that does not lead to the knowledge of God is worthless. The Book of Ecclesiastes, attributed to Solomon makes this point: "The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Eccl 1, 1-2). A life without God is a life lived in vain. No matter how much wealth, name and fame one has, if he/she does not know God and does not seek the will of God, his/her life will be like a castle built of sand.

The belief that the presence of God is limited to the Temple is erroneous and the prophets spoke strongly against it. "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me and what is my resting place?" (Is 66, 1). Temples and Churches are built not for God to dwell, but for the people to gather, to worship together. They are to be built first in the hearts of people. In other words, the hearts of the people are the true temples. When we seek God in the buildings rather than in the hearts of human beings, we will not find Him.

There are many who try to please God through rituals and religious observances without having any concern for the poor and needy around. The prophets have given strong warnings to such religiosity (Isa 1, 10-20; Am 5, 21-27; Mic 6, 6-9). St. James has given a definition for true religiosity: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (Jas 1, 27). St. James was only repeating what the OT prophets had vehemently proclaimed: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to lose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to

cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (Isa 58, 6-7). Jesus has emphatically taught that the most important aspect of religiosity is justice, mercy and faith (Mt 23, 23), and this has to become manifested in caring for the poor, which will be the only criterion of the last judgment (Mt. 25, 31-46).

The prophets proclaimed that if the Temple of the Lord becomes a cause to neglect people in need, then such a Temple have no right to exist: "I saw the LORD standing beside the altar, and he said: "Smite the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people; and what are left of them I will slay with the sword; not one of them shall flee away, not one of them shall escape". (Am 9, 1. See also Mic 3, 12; Jer 7, 1-15; 26, 4-6). Jesus presented the same message with greater force, "Then he asked them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (Mt 24, 2). God will not be pleased by the splendor and magnificence of the building and religious celebrations, when they are done, neglecting the poor and needy of the society.

Knowledge of the Lord is the true knowledge. When the very people who have the responsibility to direct the people in the ways of the Lord, give more importance to business enterprises and encourage their followers to do the same, they are in danger of falling into the same pit where Solomon fell. Here it will be helpful if the leaders take inspiration from the Apostles who appointed deacons to take care of the management of finances and freed themselves for preaching the Gospel.

Undisciplined lust was one of the main causes of Solomon's fall. It is good to examine what is happening in the society today. Most of the media programs and entertainments seem to fire up lust and destroy the foundation of family life. When the family solidarity is endangered, the society is at the risk of being

destroyed. Many ancient civilizations fell apart because of such moral decadence.

There is only one remedy for this malaise, and that was indicated at the very beginning of his rule: "If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life" (1 Kings 3, 14). And repeated again: "And as for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel for ever, as I promised David your father, saying, 'There shall not fail you a man upon the throne of Israel'" (1 Kings 9, 4-5). But there was also the severe warning "If you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them; and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight; and Israel will become a proverb and a taunt among all peoples. This house will become a heap of ruins; everyone passing by it will be astonished, and will hiss; and they will say, 'Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this house?'" (1 Kings 9, 6-8). Solomon miserably failed and the Kingdom was taken away from his descendants and eventually the temple was destroyed.

13 FORERUNNER DOUBTING?



JOHN THE BAPTIST

“Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me”

(Lk 7, 23).

He came like a storm from the wilderness empowered by fasting and prayer. Due to prolonged days of fasting his body was thin. With intense meditation and ardent prayers, his eyes were like flames of fire; his hair and beard dry and unruly. He wore a garment made of camel hair with a leather belt around his waist. People gave him a name - The Baptist. According to the instruction of the angel who announced his birth, the parents called him “John” which means “Yahweh is gracious”.

It was also foretold that many would rejoice at his birth (Lk 1, 14; Mk 1,6).

Like the roaring of a Lion, the voice of the Baptist resounded in the wilderness around Jordan River and Dead Sea. Hearing it the fortresses of conventional religious structures trembled; royal thrones rooted in immorality were shaken. Terror stricken by the message of impending disaster, people from the country side and Jerusalem rushed to the Baptist at the Jordan.

John announced that one greater than him would be coming with axe and fire. "Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Lk 3, 9). "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Lk 3, 17). He told the people to do good, have a care for the poor, not to extort more money than required, to share ones food with the hungry, cloth the naked and produce the fruits of repentance through actions of justice and charity. In short they were asked to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah. If they refuse to do so, all will be consumed by the unquenchable fire, he threatened.

People thought that he was the Messiah, but John emphatically denied, and explicitly asserted that he was not the Messiah, neither Elijah, nor the prophet who was to come at the end time. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." (Jn 1, 23). He was sent to prepare the way for the Messiah, whose sandals he was not worthy to carry (Mt 3, 11). Then one day John recognized Jesus standing among the people who came to receive the baptism and announced that he is the Messiah for whom the whole world was waiting. "This is he of whom I said, 'after me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before

me.' I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John bore witness, "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." (Jn 1, 30-34). With a humble heart, John stepped aside for the Messiah. The following Gospel passages narrate his birth, life, teachings and death: Mathew 3, 1-17. 14, 1-12; Mark 1, 1-18. 6, 14-29; Luke 1, 1-25. 57-66; 3, 1-20. 9, 7-9; and John 1, 19-34. 3, 22-30.

After giving such a powerful testimony, why was there a doubt in John's mind about the identity of Jesus? He denounced Herod for adultery and warned that God would punish him if he did not repent and forsake his relationship with his brother's wife, Herodia. Enraged by this, Herod shut John in the dark dungeon in the palace of Machaerus. While in prison, through his disciples John heard about the activities of Jesus. At this point, it would seem, a doubt arose in John's mind and so sent his disciples with the question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Lk 7, 19). Why did John have such a doubt?

Biblical Scholars give various explanations. Some think that it was not John who doubted but his disciples, and that is the reason why he sent them to Jesus to get an answer directly from him. It is an explanation based on history. Even after the death of John, his disciples continued as a community. After the death of Jesus, there were two communities of the disciples. Both groups firmly believed that their master was the true Messiah. Evidences of these conflicts could be seen in the Gospels.

The Baptist group had enough reason to claim that their

master was greater than Jesus and therefore he should be considered as the true Messiah. Their arguments were based on several facts. First was the baptism of Jesus. It is an undeniable fact, reported by all the four gospels that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. The one who baptizes is the master while the one who is baptized is the disciple. It was John who came first and Jesus was the second; a careful analysis of the baptism accounts of the four gospels would reveal the existence of such a conflict and the attempts from the part of the Church to refute the claims of the Baptist community.

In the Gospel of Mark that was written in Rome, there is no dispute about the relation between John and Jesus, probably because there was no Baptist community in Rome and hence the problem did not arise. The simple facts are reported: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan" (Mk 1, 9). Mathew on the other hand proves that Jesus was the Messiah through a discussion between Jesus and John. "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented" (Mt 3, 13-15). It was as a fulfillment of the plan of God that Jesus received Baptism from John.

In the Gospel Luke, John was imprisoned before Jesus received the Baptism and so it is not clear who gave the baptism (Lk 3, 20-22). It is Luke's literary style that when he presents a person, all that deals with that person would be narrated before moving into another subject. Thus, Luke carefully avoided the issue of who baptized whom. In the Gospel of John, Baptism of Jesus is not narrated at all, and hence the issue of baptism and superiority does not appear. But then the fourth gospel lets us hear the emphatic statement of the Baptist that not he but

Jesus is the awaited Messiah. “When the Pharisees and priests questioned him, John denied that he was the Messiah. “This is the testimony given by John ... “Who are you?” ... “I am not the Messiah.” ... Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? ... He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” (Jn 1, 19-24). Then John the Baptist permitted his disciples to follow Jesus which demonstrates that Jesus is the one to come.

While dealing with the question of John the Baptist, we need to take into consideration this background. Hence it would seem that the Baptist sent the disciples not because he doubted but to help his disciples to become convinced that Jesus is the Messiah. Were they convinced? Apparently they were not. That is why Jesus gave a strong warning “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me”, after presenting evidence for the fulfillment of prophecies about the Messiah (Is 29, 18-19; 35, 5-6; Lk 7, 22). Who is it taking offense at Jesus, John or his disciples?

There was no obvious reason to conclude that John the Baptist had any doubt about the identity of Jesus. Probably the warning was not for John but for the others. However, a close examination of what John the Baptist said about the Messiah and the activities and life style of Jesus would reveal another picture.

Impending judgment was the main theme of the Baptist’s preaching. He used the images of severe punishment such as storm, fire, ax, winnowing fan etc. He warned that all the trees that fail to produce fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. The one that is to come would purify everything in fire. Even the baptism by fire was a strong image of judgment. As in the prophetic denunciations of Amos (Am 1, 3-2, 5), the Baptist used strong words. In short, John the Baptist was trying to lead

the people to conversion by instilling fear of a just and severe God, and about His terrible judgment that was fast approaching.

On the contrary, the words and deeds of Jesus were totally different. He preached not about the approaching Day of Judgment but of the day of salvation. This difference was evident in the response Jesus gave to the disciples of the Baptist. "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Lk 7, 22). The Baptist had listed a number of signs that the awaited Messiah would do but not one of those things appears in Jesus' reply. While the Baptist preached about impending judgment, Jesus taught about the coming of the kingdom of God and the unending love and mercy of God the Father.

Through miracles, Jesus depicted the presence of the Kingdom of God on earth. He explained through his teachings, using parables and images from the nature, the forgiving love of God the Father. He provided food for the hungry, healing for the sick and forgiveness to the sinners. No one was excluded from his love and care. Using the parable of the weeds he assured that God does not want anyone to perish (Mt 13, 29). Jesus was like the servant who interceded for a second chance when the master wanted to cut and burn the fig tree that did not produce fruit (13, 6-9). In his net there will be all kinds of fishes; in his field there will be all kinds of plants. He came not to judge but to love and save. His mission was not to bring the just to heaven but to search out the sinners and to bring them back into the love of God. His kingdom was open not only to the just but also to the sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, gentiles and all those who were cast out of the main stream of the society.

Jesus taught about Judgment that would fall upon those who repeatedly reject the mercy of God. However, the Lord

would wait until the last day before judging anyone. As long as there is life, the sinner could repent and return to the Lord. The forgiveness granted to the thief on the cross proves that one could repent and be saved even at the last moment. “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23, 43).

Jesus and John the Baptist presented two different views and life styles. John’s orientation was centered on the repentance coming from the fear of judgment. On the other hand Jesus focused on the joy of the Kingdom of God manifested through love and mercy. The Baptist presented the Messiah as the judge while Jesus presented himself in the image of a bridegroom. While the Baptist rooted himself in the prophetic tradition of social justice, Jesus manifested boundless love and unending mercy. The two stands are not opposed to each other; they are complimentary. However, when Jesus presented a totally different style than what he had foretold, John might have vacillated a little. He might have wondered if he was mistaken about the identity of the coming one or about the Messiah’s mission he envisaged

It does not mean that the Baptist was in the wrong track or that he rejected Jesus. All the same it points to the fact that the Baptist also would need to change the image he had kept about God and the Messiah. Jesus had praised John highly. “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Lk 7, 24-28).

The difference is between God and man; between the one born of the Holy Spirit and the one of human beings; between the old covenant rooted in the Law and the new covenant rooted in love and mercy (Lk 16, 16). The same difference can be seen between the forerunner and the One who came after! John the Baptist came to prepare the way for the Lord, to prepare the people to receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus came to give the Spirit. John's statement about Jesus revealed the image he kept of the Messiah. "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I, is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Lk 3, 16).

John's message emphasized the conversion inspired by the awareness of sin and punishment while Jesus put the stress on the unending mercy and forgiving love of God. The outcasts of the society, sinners and tax collectors came to Jesus, listened to his message and returned with joy. Jesus loved them and their hearts were filled with hope. Not only the Pharisees but John also might have had difficulty to understand the welcome Jesus extended to the sinners and tax collectors (Lk 15, 1-2). "The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force" (Lk 16,16). John prepared, Jesus completed!

Preparation took place not only through words and deeds of the Baptist, but also through his imprisonment and cruel death. St. Mark who gave a detailed account of John's life in the prison and the way he was murdered (Mk 6, 17-29) saw it as a forewarning of the death of Jesus. John the Baptist was the culmination and the representative of the Old Testament. But, the fulfillment of the Old Testament came through Jesus. It was obvious in the teaching of Jesus (Mt. 5, 21-48) that started with the words, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient

times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment’ (Mt 5, 21) and ended with “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5, 48). To attain this perfection Jesus invited all to imitate the heavenly Father: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6, 36).

The way of Jesus was that of compassionate love, joy and mercy. It is a gratuitous gift from God. Anyone who has difficulty to accept it will not be able to experience the joy of the Kingdom of God.

What is the lesson the Bible teaches through the life of John the Baptist? John presented God as one who examines the activities of man and pronounces severe judgment. Jesus on the other hand, presented God as shepherd who goes out in search of the sinners, to bring them back to the fold. For Jesus, God is the Father who awaits the return of the lost son. When the son came back after squandering all the wealth and begged to be accepted as a slave the Father embraced him and restored him to the full status of the son. The most important lesson is this new way of seeing God. While accepting John’s call for conversion and strict measures for social justice, one must do it with mercy.

Kingdom of God is not a reward given to each one according to the merits and demerits of the recipient or according to the activities one has performed. It is a gratuitous gift from God. Jesus taught this through many a parable, especially the one about the master who gave the same wage to those who worked all day and those who worked only one hour (Mt 20, 1-16). Salvation is not attained through the effort of a person but a free gift from the Lord, as taught by St. Paul (Eph 2, 8-9; Rom 3, 21-31).

The focal point of the Good News Jesus proclaimed was not guilt feeling and fear but the immense joy that comes from the awareness of God’s pardon of all sins. “I have said these things

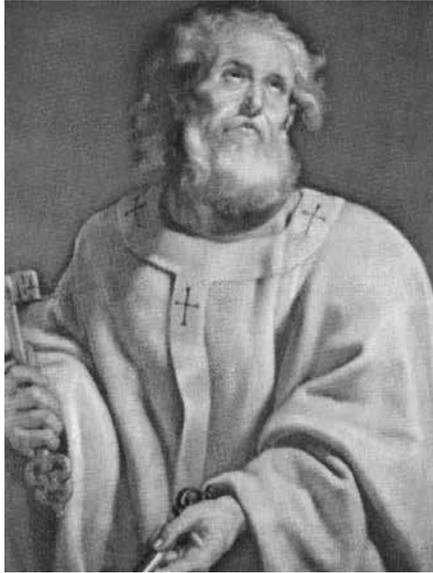
to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15, 11). It was based on this teaching that St. Paul proclaimed, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil 4, 4).

Jesus brought to the world the new experience of the Kingdom of God. It is not attained through the diligent observance of the laws but through the love one has for God and the fellow human beings (Mk 2, 22). He rejected the Pharisaic mentality that forced heavy burden on the followers and did nothing to help them (Mt 23, 4). Instead of the burden of law, Jesus provided the joy and freedom of the children of God who seek the will of God. Obedience out of fear is a big burden but obedience out of love is sweet and joyful: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Mt 11, 28-30). The ones in authority need to take care not to distort the freedom and joy Jesus made available, into an unbearable burden for the people.

The fundamental message of the Gospel is joy. The way envisaged by the Gospel is not one of judgment and rejection of those who have gone astray but is one that seeks them out with immense love and brings them back to the love of the Lord. This is to be done by forgiving sins, healing the wounds, cleansing the impure and restoring them to the status of the children of God. This is what Jesus did and is required of all those who follow him, parents, teachers and religious authorities. We have to keep on reminding ourselves the command of Jesus: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mt. 9, 13; 12, 7).

14

DISCIPLE WHO DENIED THE MASTER



PETER

“He went out and wept bitterly”

(Lk 22, 62)

Rock! That is what the Master called him. That was the dream of the master and mission of the disciple. It was Andrew who led Peter to the Master saying that he had found the one they had been waiting for (Jn 1, 40-41). It was a love at the first sight as both felt drawn to each other. The master called and the disciple followed. It was the beginning of a long journey, a holy mission. The journey together was filled with significant events. The disciple professed that the Master is the Son of God. The

Master praised him to the sky and resolved to build his Church on Peter the Rock. All the same the master did not hesitate to scold him calling Satan.

When the one who was supposed to be rock, melted like wax and became unsettled like sand, he was given warnings. However, he fell many times but did not stay down but got up holding on to the hand extended by the Master. This fall and rise continued until his life was offered to the Lord by being nailed to the Cross upside down on the Vatican Hill, in the capital of the Roman Empire. The tomb of St. Peter is under the Vatican Basilica, signifying that the Church is built on Peter. In the New Testament, his name appears 163 times. No other name except that of Jesus could be seen more times than of Peter.

The Call of Peter is described in all four Gospels in three different ways. Most of the Bible scholars agree that the Gospel of St. Mark was the first one to be written and in it Simon is the first one to be called to discipleship. Simon and his brother Andrew were fishing in the Sea of Galilee when Jesus met them for the first time. Jesus called and they left the net and boat and followed Jesus (Mk 1, 16-17). Mathew gives the same account (Mt 4, 18-20). In the Gospel of Luke, Simon decided to follow Jesus after a miraculous catch of fish (Lk 5, 1-11). He had a deep God experience at the very beginning of his discipleship. In all the three synoptic gospels the aim of the call was the same, attract people to the Kingdom of God. "From now on you will be catching people". The gospel of John presents a different version of the call. It was in response to the invitation of Andrew that Simon came to Jesus who called him and gave him the new name Peter (Jn 1, 40-42).

From then on Peter was always in the front row of the disciples. From the Gospel accounts we can conclude that for more than two years, during the Galilean ministry the house of

Peter was used as the head quarters. If we can believe that the foundation discovered by the archeologist belonged to Peter, it was a rather big house. The pilgrims can see it in the city of Capernaum, near the Synagogue on the bank of the Sea of Galilee. Soon after the teaching and miracle in the Synagogue, it was to this house that Jesus came and healed the mother-in-law of Peter; the second miracle Jesus performed (Mk 1, 29-34).

The name of Peter appears first in all the lists given in the synoptic gospels. (Mt 10, 2-4; Mk 3, 15; Lk 6, 14-16). After feeding the 5000 by the miraculous multiplication of bread, Jesus sent off the disciples to the other side. They got tired of rowing the boat against the strong wind and they were still far off from the shore. Around three in the morning they saw a figure walking towards them over the waves. Thinking it was a ghost, the disciples cried out in fear. "But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" (Mt 14, 27-30).

Peter was always so open and spontaneous. What came to his mind he spoke, without a second thought. When the Galilean mission was drawing to a close, Jesus asked the disciples to tell him what the people thought of him. The popular opinion differed and Jesus asked them what they thought of him. It was Peter who came with the ready reply that was a confession of faith recorded by all the synoptic gospels with slight variations: "You are the Christ" (Mk 8, 29); "You are the Christ of God" (Lk 9, 20); "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16, 16). Mathew recorded the full response and it reflected the post resurrection faith of the Church

When Jesus taught about the cost of discipleship, Peter asked, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (Mt 19, 27). It was again Peter who responded when the temple tax collectors asked if Jesus did not pay tax (Mt 17, 25). When Jesus made his first passion prediction, Peter tried to dissuade him from making such a fatal journey (Mt 16, 22).

When Jesus with a heavy heart, warned the disciples about their temptations and fall, Peter was quick with a declaration, reported by all the gospels with slight variations: “Even though all become deserters, I will not” (Mk 14, 29); “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” (Lk 22, 33); “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you” (Jn 13, 37). The sense of the declaration was this: come what may, I will never desert you! He loved Jesus so much that he did not want a life away from the Lord. In spite of all that, at the decisive moment he denied the Master, not once, but three times!

Jesus had a special love for Peter: he was made the leader of the Apostles; acclaimed that it was the Father who spoke through him; assured that the Church will be built upon him; promised to save him from the power of Satan (Mt 16, 17-20). However, when he became blind with human ways of thinking Jesus reprimanded him, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Mt 16, 23).

Apparently Peter did not understand the full meaning of the warnings Jesus gave him. Walking on the water towards the Master, when Peter suddenly began to sink Jesus asked him “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?” But he did not take it seriously. Seeing the glory of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration, Peter was ready to build tents to live there permanently, but did not realize that this was only a fleeting vision of the glory which was to be achieved only through

the passion and cross about which the heavenly visitors were speaking with Jesus (Lk 9, 28 -33).

The disciples could neither understand nor accept the passion and death of Jesus. They heard but did not comprehend when the Master told that they must be vigilant and gain strength through prayer. Peter demonstrated over-confidence when he announced that he will not forsake him, even if others did. In a way he was saying that he was better than the others. Knowing Peter well, Jesus told him, “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22, 31-32). Still Peter did not realize that he was weak and could fall.

When Jesus told the disciples to sell their cloak to buy swords, they did not understand the inner meaning of it and so they responded that they had two swords (Lk 22, 36-38). Jesus was telling them to become strong through prayer and faith. Jesus told Peter and two of his companions to pray with him in the garden of Gethsemane but they could not. When the Master was in so much agony that he sweated blood, the disciples slept (Mt 26, 37). Peter loved Jesus but did not comprehend the real situation until the soldiers came to arrest the Master.

When Peter saw that Jesus was going to be arrested, he woke up and used his sword. This caused more trouble later as he was recognized and questioned while waiting in the courtyard of the high priest. He was afraid of what he did. Peter came to a rude awakening that he cannot save the Master with his sword. He also got reprimanded by the Master “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Mt 26, 51-52; Jn 18, 10). Jesus was arrested and taken away. Secretly, Peter followed him at a distance.

When the Master was put on trial in the house of the high

priest, Peter was warming himself with the servants who had gathered around a fire. It was there that Peter had the misfortune of denying the Master three times: "Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a maid came up to him, and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." And when he went out to the porch, another maid saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the cock crowed." (Mt 26, 69-74) He did so because of his fear, fear for his life.

After Peter had denied the Master a third time, "The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly" (Lk 22, 61-62). Peter remembered all that had transpired between him and Jesus. So easily he denied the Master after boasting that he will never deny him. He was broken hearted and cried.

Peter was sincerely shocked that he denied Jesus. However, he failed again. He failed to believe when Mary Magdalene announced that Jesus had risen and she had seen him (Lk 24, 10-11; Mk 16, 9-11). He ran to the tomb to see what had happened and all that he could see was an empty tomb and returned, confused (Jn 20, 1-7). Finally Jesus personally appeared and showed him the open wounds to eliminate his doubts, gave the Holy Spirit and authority to forgive sins. Even after all these he fell again.

In the last chapter of the Gospel of John, we can see

a dramatic picture of the fall and return of Peter. In the last episode of the gospel we see Peter in his home in Capernaum with six of the disciples. “After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing” (Jn 21, 1-3). Jesus had called him with the promise to make him catch men instead of fish. But, he decided to go back to his old trade again with six of his companions. The Gospel does not say what happened to the other four disciples. The community of the twelve, the foundation of the Church Jesus established was shattered.

We see a dim picture of the disciples of Jesus. All hopes are gone and all the promises forgotten. They fished all night but caught nothing. They felt totally defeated. With great hopes they had started out with Jesus but all those hopes are now shattered. They returned to the old trade and there also they failed miserably. But then Jesus entered into their lives again with endless mercy and boundless compassion

As the disciples were in the depth of despair, a stranger called out and asked, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” (Jn 21, 5). When they replied “No”, he asked them to cast the net on the right side and then fish came and filled their net. Peter still did not recognize Jesus but John did and told Peter that it was the Lord. “When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea” (Jn 21, 7). Peter could not wait to reach Jesus and so swam ahead to be near him.

There seems to be some significance for the remark about

Peter's awareness of being naked when he heard that it was Jesus calling. Could there be some connection with the nakedness of the first parents who became aware of their naked state when God came to them? This sense of nakedness cannot be covered with some cloak. The conversation that followed sheds light into this issue.

The disciples were hungry and tired after fishing all night. With the tender love of an understanding mother, Jesus awaited his beloved disciples with baked bread and fried fish. After the meal, Jesus asked Peter a question he had dreaded all the time (Jn 21, 15-19). But it was not an interrogation or judgment as Peter had feared. Jesus did not accuse him or express disappointment that Peter had rejected him. All that Jesus wanted from Peter was confession that he loved him (Jn 21, 15-19). It also reminded him his earlier claim that he will not reject him and is ready to die with him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" (Lk 22, 33). It is important to note that Jesus addressed him not Peter, a name Jesus gave him indicating the firmness of faith on which the Church was going to be built, but in his old name, "Simon son of John" and that also three times (Jn 21,15.16.17) as if to indicate a new beginning (Jn 1,42).

Jesus was preparing Peter for a new beginning, forgetting the past and healing the old wounds. All that was needed for this new beginning was love. Jesus repeated the same question three times to give Peter an opportunity to confess his love three times in preparation for the new chapter in the life of Peter. Peter was always quick and spontaneous and with the same spontaneity Peter answered that he loved Jesus but when the question was repeated a third time, he felt overwhelmed. "He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him "Feed my sheep" (Jn 21, 17).

Peter offered himself at the feet of Jesus who knew everything. Jesus knew all his failures and all his shortcomings but trusted him with the responsibility of his Church, the people of God. There was no need of listing his sins and asking for forgiveness as Jesus knew everything. Beyond the failures was love. All that Peter wanted was to be with Jesus who is all knowing and all forgiving. The one who taught to forgive “seventy-seven times” (Mt 18, 21-22) forgave all the past and enveloped Peter with unlimited love.

Jesus entrusted his sheep to Peter. Peter proved his love for the Master by dying on the Cross upside down. Jesus had predicted how Peter would glorify God, “Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go” (Jn 21, 18).

Peter offered his life to feed the sheep Jesus entrusted to him. He was beaten, imprisoned; he stood before judges and proclaimed his love for and faith in Jesus Christ. He was no more feeble and wavering but was firm in his words and deeds. He did not vacillate when he knew that his life was at stake. He knew that the Master was with him at every step of the way.

When a new conflict emerged in the Church with the appearance of Paul, the apostle of the gentiles, Peter took the initiative to discern the will of God and to restore peace in the Church (Acts 15, 1-29). With this ended the story of Peter in the New Testament. The two epistles by Peter do not provide any new information about him.

What can we learn from the failures of Peter? The first cause of his failures might have been his over confidence that boarded pride and it led him to trust in his own power rather than being humble enough to seek God’s help through prayer. It took

numerous failures before he learned that he would fall if the Lord who called him “Rock” did not support him. When we are blown up with pride, we would fail to depend on God and would fail easily.

The second cause of Peter's fall was that he failed to listen to the warnings Jesus gave him. He did not learn even after he was called “Satan”, almost drowned in the water, and Jesus assured to pray for him because Satan was seeking to sift him like wheat. If we do not listen to the warnings we get in various ways, we could fall as Peter did. Lack of prayer was another cause of failure. Jesus told him to stay awake and pray but he either did not take it seriously or could not stay awake and so fell asleep (Lk 22, 45). When he woke up, it was too late and he tried in vain to defend Jesus with the sword. The disciples of Jesus must wear the weapons of prayer and humility rather than swords of steel (Eph 6, 13-17).

Another lesson to be learned from Peter's falls is that we must avoid the circumstances that would lead to sin. It could be place, work, people or games. Peter hung around the house of the High Priest with the servants who were warming themselves near the fire and it led to the questioning and denial of Jesus by Peter. Only when Jesus turned and looked, Peter became aware of the sin he committed and left the place.

The greatest lesson we learn from Peter is that of love and repentance. Peter fell many times but he did not stay where he fell. Again and again he got up, holding on to the hand of Jesus. He knew that the Lord will not forsake him, no matter what he did. He was deeply aware of the endless love of the Lord and this awareness became the source of his love for Jesus. In spite of all his weaknesses, he loved Jesus with intense passion. It was on this love that Jesus built his Church.

Jesus knew Peter's sincerity and love as well as his weakness

that led him to deny the Lord. The feeble, spontaneous Peter became the rock on which the Lord built his Church. God works with the simple, weak people. We see that all through the history of Salvation and the history of the Church. We must trust that our weakness can turn into strength in the hands of the Lord.

No matter what we do, if we repent and turn to the Lord, He would accept us with love. Loving Jesus would mean trusting in his forgiving love. Once a film depicted a scene where Peter was running to reach Judas before he hung himself. On the way he kept on shouting, “No Judas, the Lord will forgive you” but Judas could not believe in that forgiving love and killed himself before Peter could save him. This may be a story but it shows how deeply Peter believed in the forgiving love of Jesus. He had taken to heart the words of Jesus, “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk 15, 7).

15

APOSTLE TURNED TRAITOR



JUDAS

“Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself”

(Mt 27, 5).

Judas who is depicted as the traitor might be the most unfortunate character presented in the Bible. Jesus, the very personification of love and mercy, lamented about him saying that it would have been better if he was not born. St. John presents him as a thief filled with greed. All four Gospels call him traitor. He accepted 30 pieces of silver coins as a payment or reward for handing over the Master to the enemies. As a punishment for his crime, he hung himself “and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out”(Acts 1, 18). With this gory picture the bible concludes the narrative

about Judas, the twelfth apostle. What led him to this tragic end? What does Bible tell us through this story of the Apostle who became a traitor?

The New Testament speaks about Judas more than any other apostle except Peter. Judas appears four times in all the Gospels and twice in the Acts of the Apostles. In the lists of the Apostles, presented in the gospels, Peter always appears first and Judas last.

The name Judas comes from the Hebrew word “Jehuda” which means praise. But, contrary to the etymological meaning of his name, his life was not at all praiseworthy. The Evangelists added some attributes to his name. The Synoptic Gospels present him as Judas Iscariot, the traitor (Mt 10, 4; Mk 3, 19) or as Judas who became the traitor (Lk 6,16).

There is a dispute among scholars about the meaning of the word Iscariot. John presents Judas as the son of Simon Iscariot. But some of the manuscripts refer to him as the son of Simon from Kerioth. There is a village named Kerioth Hebron, about 20 Km south of Hebron and therefore it is argued that Judas was from the village of Kerioth

However, there are sufficient reasons to conclude that Iscariot denotes some particular characteristics of the person rather than the place of his origin. The Aramaic word “iscariot” came from the Greek word “Sikkarios” which means one who wears a special kind of a sword. This was an attribute given to the zealots who always carried a sword. Luke 6, 15 reports that one of the twelve Apostles was a Zealot. During the last supper, the night before his death Jesus told the disciples: “let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one” (Lk 22, 36), immediately they responded: “Look, Lord, here are two swords” (Lk 22, 38). This fact could imply that more than one of the apostles belonged to the Zealots. Since all the Apostles

came from Galilee, it is not likely that one of them came from the Southern part of Judah. Hence it may not be quite wrong if we conclude that Iscariot was an attribute of the Zealots. If this conclusion is right, then it would shed some light on to the life and behavior of Judas.

The first criticism of Judas that appears in the Synoptic Gospels is in connection with the anointing at Bethany. While Jesus sat at dinner in the house of Simon the leper, a woman anointed the head of Jesus with costly perfume. Seeing this as a needless luxury some of the disciples protested against it. They even calculated the cost of the perfume as 300 denary and commented that the money could have been given to the poor (Mt. 26, 6-9; Mk 14, 3-5). The Synoptic Gospels did not reveal the identity of this "some disciples" but John clearly stated that it was Judas and accused him of greed and theft: "He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he was in charge of the common fund and used to help himself to the contents" (Jn 12, 6).

It was shortly after this that Judas plotted to hand over Jesus to the Jewish leadership (Mt 26, 14-16; MK 14, 10-11). While Mark said they agreed to pay him, Mathew specified the amount as 30 pieces of Silver coins. The Gospels did not clarify if there was any relationship between the plot to betray and anointing. However, there is a possibility of the same when seen this in the light of what John said about his greed for money and protest against luxury. However we need to look more closely to see if Judas had only money motive in handing over Jesus to the Jewish authority especially because he became disappointed and returned the money when he saw that Jesus accepted the death sentence.

St. Luke's presentation sheds some light on the motivation of Judas. "Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who

was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them” (Lk 22, 3-4). This detail in the Lukan narrative has a special significance. At the beginning of the public life of Jesus, Satan approached him with various temptations “And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time” (Lk 4, 13). Here we can see it as a warning that Satan would return again at the end of Jesus’ public ministry. What Satan could not achieve through the temptations was attained through one of Jesus’ disciples. The Gospels do not speak about Satan entering in any other person but Judas. St. John also gives a similar picture.

Judas becomes the subject of discussion again during the Last Supper. All four Gospels report that Jesus told them that one of the twelve would betray him (Mt 26, 21-25; Mk 14, 18-20; Lk 22, 21-23; Jn 13, 21-30). Mathew and John give some hints that it was Judas that Jesus was referring to; but the disciples did not understand whom Jesus intended. His words were presented in such a way as to hide the true identity from the other disciples so as to give still another opportunity for Judas to rethink about his betrayal. However Judas did not, or could not. There were higher powers and motivations involved.

The gospel of John calls attention to the real power behind this tragic event: “Then after he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly” (Jn 13, 27). The other disciples misunderstood what Jesus said and they concluded that Jesus had asked him to do something for the group or to give some charity to the poor. It would seem that Judas thought Jesus was encouraging him to execute the project he had planned with the Jewish authority. Immediately he went out; it was dark. Did Judas realize that he was going away from the “Light of the World” and entering into darkness? Did he know that he was in the grip of Satan?

Next we see Judas during the agony in the garden of Gethsemane. This time he came with a group to arrest Jesus. All four Gospels have recorded this incident (Mt 26, 47-50; Mk 14, 43-45; Lk 22, 47-48; Jn 18, 2-3). The Synoptic Gospels call him one of the twelve. Mathew and Mark report that Judas kissed Jesus as he, “had given them a sign, saying, “The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him and lead him away under guard”. According to Luke “he drew near to Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, “Judas, would you betray the Son of man with a kiss?” John does not give any of these details but that tells Judas came to the place with a band of soldiers and officers. With this ends the description of Judas in Mark, Luke and John.

Mathew has made a dramatic presentation of the end of Judas. “When Judas, his betrayer, saw that he was condemned, he repented and, . . . And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver . . . bought with them the potter’s field, to bury strangers in . . . Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord directed me” (Mt 27, 1-10). This is the last mention of Judas in the Gospels. Judas repented when he found out that Jesus was going to be killed and tried to return the money he received as a reward for betraying the Master but the authority was indifferent to his mourning. Hence, throwing the silver coins at their feet, Judas went and hung himself. The Acts of the Apostles gives a similar, but a more gory description of the end of the traitor “Now this man bought a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1, 18).

What is the message the Bible is conveying through these descriptions? In the last mention of Judas in the Bible, he is

presented as one who abandoned his call and chose the path of death. Hence the disciples gathered in the upper room, prayed to discern the will of God and to choose another person to take his place and to continue the ministry Judas renounced (Acts 1, 25). In all these Judas appears as an utter failure. However, a closer examination of his life, actions and possible motivations behind them might reveal a slightly different picture of Judas.

It is the Greek word “Paradidonai” that is translated as betray - traitor, However, the Greek word does not necessarily imply a betrayal. Literally it means only to hand over. This word appears 122 times in the New Testament of which 57 are in connection with Jesus and 44 in connection with Judas. The word “hand over” in itself does not have a nuance of cheating or betraying. The Jewish leaders and high priests handed over Jesus to Pilot (Mk 15, 1). Pilot handed him over to them to do as they wished (Jn 19, 16). None of these incidents seem to refer to a betrayal. St. Paul does not speak about Judas but does say that Jesus was handed over to be crucified (Rom 4, 25). It is more noteworthy when Paul writes that the Father handed over His son Jesus to be crucified (Rom 8, 32); again he tells us that Jesus handed over himself to be crucified for us (Gal 2, 20). All these show the depth and width of the meaning of the word “Paradidonai”. Recently in some liturgies, in the words of institution of the Eucharist, the phrase “the night he was betrayed” has been changed into “the night he was handed over”, thereby calling attention to the fulfillment of God’s plan rather than to the deceit of Judas. Though it does not free Judas from his responsibility, it indicates that everything happened according to the plan of God.

Though Judas is listed last in the list of the Apostles, Jesus had given him a more important place in the group, took him in confidence and entrusted him with a great responsibility. He was given the charge of the finances of the group for the

three years they were together. It was he who was responsible for finding food and shelter for the group. His position in the society was high enough for him to contact the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem.

The information we have about the seating at the Last Supper also says something about the importance Jesus gave to Judas. John who leaned on the bosom of the Lord might have been sitting at his left while Peter was a little farther away because he beckoned John to ask Jesus who was to betray him. It was to Judas that Jesus gave first the morsel of bread dipped in wine. This shows that Judas was sitting close to Jesus, probably on his right side. According to the Jewish custom, the seat on the right hand side of the host is the most important seat. Having Judas sit at his right side and giving him bread dipped in wine, shows the importance Jesus had given to Judas.

Judas was given not only an important place and responsibility but also many warnings. At the Last Supper, Jesus clearly said that one among the disciples would betray him. But Judas remained firm in his decision and plans. Why was he so adamant about his plan? Did he really want Jesus to be killed by his enemies? His final act of remorse and despair would seem to indicate that he had some other motives.

Franco Zeffirelli a film director of world repute, in his movie, Jesus of Nazareth gives a valuable insight concerning this issue. Some of the Church Fathers also have made a similar conclusion. It is possible that historically speaking this explanation is more credible. Judas was a member of the revolutionary organization called Zealots and a friend of Simon the Zealot. They came together to Jesus. The life with Jesus changed Simon's aspirations and attitudes, whereas Judas kept the dreams of the Zealots, believing that he could convince the Master not only to join the movement, but also to take up the

leadership of the Zealots and establish the Kingdom of David by throwing away the Romans

Judas was deeply impressed by the power of Jesus to perform miracles and to attract people to him. He believed that Jesus was sent by God to save Israel. Soon after Jesus fed 5000 with 5 loaves of bread and two fishes, there was an attempt to make him king (Jn 6, 14-15). May be because the disciples supported this move, Jesus sent them across the sea, even though it was getting dark and a storm was coming. The next day there was a serious conflict at the end of which many of the disciples left Jesus. When Jesus asked the Apostles if they also wanted to go away, Peter responded with a confession of faith (Jn 6, 60-69). Soon after this, we see the first negative remark about Judas: “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil. He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him” (Jn 6, 70-71). Apparently Judas had a decisive role in the attempt to make Jesus King. Depicting Judas as devil, soon after the Eucharistic discourse, provides a key to his character that he did not have the kind of faith Peter who confessed Jesus as the one who has the word of eternal life.

It was the promise that Jesus would give his body and blood as food for eternal life that prompted many to leave Him, saying his words are hard to accept (Jn 6, 60-66). But Judas did not leave because he still hoped to execute his hidden agenda. Though he was attracted to the miracles Jesus performed, he failed to understand their meaning; he could not accept his teachings in his heart.

Judas saw Jesus as the son of David who would re-establish the Kingdom of David. In fact, Judas was not the only one who had such a dream. Initially most of the disciples hoped to occupy a high position in the kingdom Jesus would establish. It was this hope that was expressed by the sons of Zebedee when

they requested seats on the right and on the left of Jesus (Mk 10, 27). Probably because of the same reason, Jesus asked not to publicize Peter's confession of faith. Apparently until the death of Jesus, all the Apostles, deep in their hearts, have nurtured such a dream,

It is possible that more than others, Judas accepted and honored Jesus as the Messiah. Judas was thrilled with the royal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. But, what followed did not meet his expectations. Hence Judas felt compelled to prove to the Jewish leadership that Jesus is the awaited Messiah. If the Sanhedrin, the highest authority in Israel, would become convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, he could accomplish his goal more easily. So, Judas thought out a plan to bring Jesus before the Sanhedrin and prove that Jesus is the awaited Messiah.

There was enough reason for Judas to believe that Jesus would not consent to such an encounter as he witnessed the temple scene where Jesus drove the merchants out of the temple followed by sharp criticism of the Jewish leaders. Since all the possibility for a friendly encounter became impossible, Judas decided to force Jesus to come before the Sanhedrin, with the help of the Jewish leaders.

Judas would have never thought that the political and religious leaders could in any way hurt Jesus. He had seen the soldiers who came to arrest Jesus return without touching him (Jn 7, 32. 45-46) and the failure of the repeated attempts to stone or kill him (Jn 7,30. 8, 50. 10, 31-39; Mt. 21, 45-46; Lk 19,47-48). All these would have convinced Judas that the Sanhedrin would not harm Jesus but proclaim him as Messiah, following which Jesus would drive away the Romans and re-establish the Kingdom of Israel. A dream he nurtured with intense hope and deep conviction.

What followed the arrest of Jesus shattered all the dreams

of Judas who had never expected Jesus to submit to the passion and death. He was utterly disappointed when the Sanhedrin condemned him to death and Jesus accepted the sentence without a word of protest. Jesus appeared to be a helpless victim. He wondered what happened to his miraculous power and why the angels did not come to his aide. Judas began to wonder if Jesus was just a human being. Why the Son of David was being dragged around like an ordinary criminal? Judas could not understand anything and he was flung into utter confusion.

When Judas realized that his expectations were not being fulfilled, he began to sink into confusion and despair. He became deeply aware of the fact he was terribly mistaken and cheated. He was not providing a chance for Jesus to prove himself that he was the Messiah but leading the way for the Sanhedrin to accuse Jesus of blasphemy and condemn him to death. He felt that the Sanhedrin cheated him. He did not know that he was being subjected even to a greater disillusionment.

When Judas saw the miracles Jesus performed, he truly believed that he is the world awaited Messiah. Now that faith was being challenged. He wondered if the carpenter from Nazareth was only a poor, ordinary man. Seeing Jesus standing before the Sanhedrin as a defeated man, accepting all the insult and even death sentence, Judas was shocked and confessed that he committed an enormous crime by betraying his beloved Master, an innocent human being. Judas was filled with terrible guilt feeling and utter confusion.

The gospel of Mathew reports that Judas repented, with great sorrow confessed his sin, made restitution by giving back the money he had received for betraying the Master and finally accepted the self inflicted penalty of death (Mt 27, 3-5). In spite of all these he stands as a negative model, a typical example of one accursed. Why?

The first mistake Judas committed was that he nurtured a hidden agenda and was determined to force Jesus to act the way he wanted rather than understand and follow the teachings of the Master. He assumed that Jesus approved of his plans when the Master gave him special care and concern and took the warnings Jesus gave as support and encouragement for his project. Peter converted when Jesus gave him a warning, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mt. 16, 23). But, no such conversion took place in Judas because he saw Jesus as a king like David who would liberate Israel from the foreign domination. He could not believe that Jesus became man to save the world through self-sacrifice.

Judas failed, mainly, in the area of faith. He could not believe that God manifested his strength in being vulnerable. The one who expected the glory of David could not understand the image of the suffering servant. Since there was no room for suffering and death in the Messiah of his vision, Judas could not recognize in Jesus, who stood there as a defeated man, the Messiah foretold by the prophets and awaited by the people. When his plans failed he began to see Jesus just as an innocent man whom he betrayed and was condemned to die on the cross.

The picture of Judas is not complete by seeing him only as a traitor who betrayed the Master for 30 pieces of silver. The Bible neither adds nor subtracts his accountability for what he did. He is presented as a warning to all those who are called and to all those who are prone to misunderstand the message given by God. He is a warning to all those who ignore the warnings they receive from God through various means. Judas misunderstood the message of Jesus; he misunderstood his mission and the teachings of Jesus. Finally when he utterly failed in his project and was immersed in guilt, rather than seeking refuge in the mercy of God, he decided to punish himself by ending his life.

He could not believe in the forgiving love of Jesus who called him “friend”, even when he approached Jesus to betray him with a kiss.

Judas could not discern between the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, his own feelings and the temptations by the devil. His self righteous attitude blinded him and led to total disaster. Like Samson, Saul and many others before him, Judas also succumbed to the temptations of Satan. Judas never thought that he could be wrong in his convictions and so he considered the warnings Jesus gave as meant for others. Finally when he realized that he was mistaken, he was deep in the abyss of despair.

Judas is a negative model never to be imitated. His life teaches how one can go away from God and fall into total disaster. However we have no right to condemn him to hell. Of course, the gospels do report that Jesus said it would have been better if he had not been born. But then one should not forget Jesus’ prayer from the cross: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk 23, 34). It is quite reasonable to assume that Judas also was included in this prayer. The Bible has presented the life of Judas with all his failures, not to judge him or condemn him to hell but to teach us from his mistakes. If Judas had confessed his sins to God and asked for forgiveness, he would have found peace as Peter did through his tears, upon realizing his sin of denying Jesus. When Judas realized that he was mistaken he confessed not to God but to the high priest who was a cohort in the crime.

In the case of Judas there remains a question without answer. What is the relationship between God’s plan and man’s responsibility? Salvation of humanity was attained through the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. The process of that holocaust began with the action of Judas, by his handing Jesus over to the Jewish authority. Peter has taught that it was part of the Divine

plan: "Brethren, the scripture had to be fulfilled, ...concerning Judas who was guide to those who arrested Jesus...For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his habitation become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it'" (Acts 1, 16-20). Based on this, some argue that Judas who helped to fulfill the plan of God should be considered as a saint, not as a traitor. Such a line of thinking was evidenced in the Gospel of Judas; a Gnostic work that came into existence during the second half of the second century. According to this book, Jesus had requested Judas to free his soul that was imprisoned in his body. It was according to this request of Jesus that Judas operated. Jesus revealed only to Judas the truth that the human soul is imprisoned in the human body. Hence, the Gospel of Judas claimed that Judas was not a traitor and sinner but a great saint.

Though there is no justification in depicting Judas as a hero and saint, it cannot be denied that just as Satan and the Serpent, he also has a place in the plan of God. However, there is not enough reason to say that Judas handed over Jesus with the intention of fulfilling the plan of God. Judas had his motivation in all his dealings with Jesus. He is fully responsible for his plans and actions, executed in total freedom and in accordance with his own hidden agenda. However, without his knowledge, a Divine plan was being fulfilled through what he did. Here we come to the end of human logic and capacity to comprehend the mystery of God's plan.

There is no clear answer to the question about the sin of Judas that led to the fulfillment of a Divine plan. In exploring this problem, we have to admit human limitations. Judas is accountable for his actions according to his knowledge, freedom and decision. He was determined to force Jesus to act according to his plan, not according to the plan of God the Father. He had close contact with Jesus, heard his teachings and warnings. But he twisted them all to suit his agenda and so he cannot escape

the responsibility for his doings. On the other hand through all these actions of Judas God's plan for the salvation of humanity was being fulfilled.

The relation between God's plan and human freedom is a mystery that has been the subject of age old disputes and discussions. It affects not only the case of Judas but all of humanity. Each one is responsible for what one does. At the same time, the truth remains that nothing happens without the knowledge and permission of God. Man has freedom to do what he wants but at the same time each one has the responsibility to discern the will of God and act accordingly. Only God who sees the heart has the right to judge. That is why Jesus said, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Mt. 7, 1).

16

PRICE OF DISHONESTY



ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA

“You did not lie to us but to God!”

(Acts 5, 4)”

The last episode of “Losers” presented in this book deals with the deception of a couple that is depicted in the book of Acts of the Apostles Chapter 5, versus 1 to 11. With great enthusiasm this couple decided to join the new Community of Christians. But, something went wrong and they met with a tragic end. In three hours their bodies were buried. Why did they fail so miserably and what lesson can we learn from this?

The meaning of the name Ananias is “God is merciful”. The name is a combination of “hanan” which means mercy and the revealed name of God, Yahweh. The meaning of the name “Sapphira” is beautiful. They were members of the first Christian community of Jerusalem. As many have done (Acts 4, 34 – 37), they also sold their property and entrusted the

money to the Apostles. But set aside a portion of the money, as a precaution, in case of an eventual collapse of the Christian community.

Peter, the head of the Apostles, questioned Ananias but he assured Peter that they have handed over the entire amount. Peter told him that he lied not to him but to God. Shocked by the verdict, Ananias fell dead. Three hours later, his wife Sapphira came to join the community and Peter questioned her and she repeated the response of Ananias and she followed the same fate. Thus, they stayed together in life, selling the property, telling lie, and in dying and in funeral.

Many might question the justification of the death penalty, without giving them a chance to repent, for saying a small lie. Some claim that it is not a historical fact but a story to warn the future generation. There are people who assert that the couple died out of heart attack, due to the severity of the way they were questioned. However, St. Luke who was a historian did not present it as a story. Hence the incident merits careful examination.

St. Luke presented this incident while recording the history of the first Christian Community. It was not a temporary group but a community that shared everything in common. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2, 42). They exercised communion not only in prayer but also in their wealth. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2, 44-45).

They had a unique community experience: they shared everything in common and nobody lacked anything. No one was excluded and all the faithful were welcome to this community. It was a perfect communion as envisaged by Jesus. There were

people who sold all their property but it was not a requirement for membership in the community. Joseph of Cypres (Apostles called him Barnabas) was a model of sharing. He sold a field and gave the money to the Apostles (Acts 4, 36-37) but he did not say that he had sold everything he had. The emphasis was on sincerity and in sharing everything in common.

The problem with Ananias and Sapphira was that they pretended to be giving everything while setting aside a portion. They lied and the Apostle pointed out the reason for the same as being under the influence of Satan. It is not clear why they lied and what they expected to gain by it. They might have doubted the continuation of the new community. If everything falls apart, they would have some reserve fund to rely on. Nothing might have happened if they were honest about it. Whatever the motivation, they tried to cheat God and so were punished immediately.

The punishment was executed not by Peter but by God. Peter only exposed their ploy and they could not go on living with the lie. A similar account is presented in the book of Joshua (Ch. 7) where Achan took some things for himself when Israel attacked the city of Ai. The people stoned Achan and his family to death. Though the crime was similar there is a difference in the way punishment is executed. In the case of Ananias and Sapphira, it was God who carried out the punishment.

In the Qumran community that lived on the western bank of the Dead Sea, they had a law that if one of the members lied to the community, that person must be punished by not allowing him to eat one of the meals. Here the punishment is rather simple.

Ananias and Sapphira were accused of cheating the Holy Spirit by lying to God. Hence their wrong doing was taken seriously. Influenced by Satan, they turned against God. Their

sins were listed as infidelity, lying and hypocrisy. On the practical level, when something is given to the community, it becomes the property of God and so belongs to all. When a part of it is removed, it becomes stealing. Transparency and communion was the sign of the first Christian community and any behavior that distorted these characteristics were considered as serious since it would affect the very existence of the Church. That might have been the reason for such a severe punishment for their dishonesty.

Honesty should be a characteristic mark of the Christians. “You shall not lie” is one of the Ten Commandments. Hence lying is considered as a breach of the Covenant with God. Telling a lie could be equivalent to denying God who is Truth. This will undermine the credibility of the believer. Hypocrisy is a sin most hated by God and it is the accusation Jesus made against the Pharisees (Mt 23, 13-36). Pretending to be good while being wicked inside is a situation that destroys trust in persons and society. Our security is not in the accumulated wealth but in the love of God.

When the first Christian community is presented as a model for communion, the sacred author does not hide the shortcomings of that community. These happened mostly in the case of managing the wealth of the community. It was to solve this problem that the Apostles appointed the Deacons (Acts 6, 1-7). St. Paul gave strong warnings against the misappropriation of wealth and discrimination against the poor in the society (1 Cor 11, 17-22).

The purpose of narrating this event is evident from the fear of the people reported twice: “Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it” (Acts 5, 5). “And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things” (Acts 5, 11). Dishonesty in financial

matters is a mortal sin that could cause death. This lesson is still very relevant today as there is so much misappropriation and misuse of common property. Appropriating common property for personal use as well as using common property for luxury and vain glory are examples of being unfaithful to the society.

The Church and the members of the Church would shine before the world when they return to a life of simplicity, deep trust in the providence of God and agape. Then the people of God will be a sign like a city built on top of a mountain. Ultimately that was the aim of this apparent cruel incident. This is a message the Holy Father, Pope Francis, is giving to the world.

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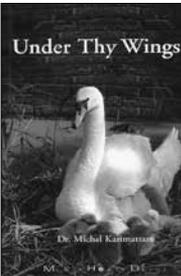


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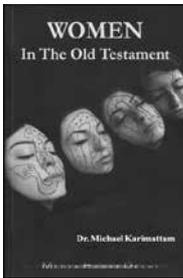
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