



Dr. Michael Karimattam

REJOICE

in the

*Lord*

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There are many passages in the Bible that could give the impression that the sacred authors are trying to create an image of God that would evoke fear in the people. We can see many incidents to support this assumption. But, when one takes a closer look at these passages another picture would come into focus.

In the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament, we can see a picture of God who loves the people more deeply than a mother loves her child. This merciful love evokes not fear but joy and hope. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3, 16). When the Word of God sheds light in our paths, our lives will be filled with hope and hearts with joy. Twenty Seven such passages are presented in this book



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**Dr. Michael Karimattam**



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## **Rejoice in the Lord**

**by Dr. Michael Karimattam**

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## Contents

Introduction.....	7
1. Though the Fig Tree do not Blossom .....	9
2. Unending Love of God.....	16
3. A New Heart .....	23
4. In the Valley of dry Bones.....	29
5. God reigns .....	34
6. In The House of Lord.....	41
7. Many will Rejoice .....	49
8. Rejoice Highly Favored! .....	53
9. Rejoice in the Lord.....	56
10. Good News of Great Joy.....	59
11. Path to Happiness .....	64
12. Joy in Retreating.....	70
13. Good News, the Source of Happiness.....	77
14. Joy in Suffering .....	82
1. The Reason for Persecution.....	83
II. The Source of Joy .....	84
15. Citizenship in Heaven.....	88

16. Joy of Jesus.....	92
1. Jesus Rejoiced: .....	93
2. The Work of the Holy Spirit: .....	94
3. The Revelation of the Holy Spirit: .....	94
4. Good News to the Poor: .....	95
5. Eschatological Vision:.....	95
17. Joy of Liberation .....	98
18. When a Treasure is found .....	105
19. Joy of finding the lost.....	109
20. Father's Joy.....	113
21. Salvation to This House .....	118
22. Living is Christ and dying is gain .....	123
23. Rejoice Always .....	128
24. Rejoice in Hope.....	133
25. Rejoice in the Weakness.....	140
26. Rejoice in the Loss .....	145
27. Rejoice in the Lord.....	149
28. God who wipes away Tears.....	153



## **Introduction**

There is a common notion that the God who appears in the Old Testament is a severe Judge who pronounces Judgment according to strict justice. He is a judge who observes every single action, thought and desire of the human being and pronounces His judgment accordingly. It is a frightening image. Not only in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament we have frightening images of God.

What was written by St. Paul in the letter to Philipines is an example, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2,12). The picture Jesus presented about the Last Judgment also has frightening images. Who could help but be frightened by the image in Mathew 25, 41: “Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt 25, 41). Then, is it fear the main feeling, the Bible tries to awaken in man?

There are many verses that would give the impression that the sacred authors are trying to create an image of God that evokes fear in the people. We can see many incidents to support this assumption. But, while studying and analyzing the Bible carefully, we can see another picture coming into focus.

In the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament, we see the picture of God who loves the people more deeply than a mother loves her child. This merciful love evokes not fear but joy and hope. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3, 16). It is God who watches over us, invites us and attracts us to Himself through the pages of the Bible.

The Catholic Church has condemned the teaching that the image of God in the Old Testament is that of a Creator and cruel Judge while the image of God in the New Testament is that of a loving and merciful Father of Jesus Christ. God who appears in the Old Testament and New Testament are not two persons but one and the same person. God who appears in the Bible is the Creator, Protector, Judge, Savior, and Source of life. The Bible reveals the image of God, step by step as the people come to know the various aspects of God the Father.

The basic attitude one should have towards God is not that of fear but of love, joy and hope. That is why the message of Jesus Christ is called the “Good News”. The fundamental aim of the Gospel and the Evangelization is joy, the revelation of God who so loved the world to give His only son to save the humanity. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full” (Jn 15, 11). The aim of this book is to examine closely the message of the love of God presented in the Bible. It communicates the message of joy and invites us to rejoice in the Lord. An attempt will be made to analyze the verses and incidents of hope presented in the Old Testament and New Testament that the readers may experience the joy Jesus has offered us.

## 1.

### **Though the Fig Tree do not Blossom**

*“Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will exult in the God of my salvation” (Habakkuk 3, 17-18).*

When everything goes well, when we have health, wealth and reputation, it is easier to praise God and give Him thanks. It is easy to sing Halleluiah and praise God who has given us prosperity. But, what if we lost everything? It is commonly said that those who live according to the commandments of the Lord will have prosperity, joy and long life. But one stands in shock and despair when all is lost, as it happened to Job.

Job was rich and blameless before God. But all of a sudden, he lost everything. Robbers took his animals; fields of wheat burned to ashes; ships were wrecked in the wild storm; all his ten children died as the building they were in was destroyed by a tornado. Job, in despair sat on the heap of manure and pulled worms from his body affected by leprosy. Since she could not bear the stink from his body, his wife lamented, “Are you still praising God? Curse God who allowed all these to happen and die like your children who perished under the building?”

This is an attitude that existed in the society at all times that those who live according to the commandments of God will have no unfortunate incidents in life. Those who see only the material goods as the blessing of God would have difficulty to think otherwise. The friends, who heard about the misfortunes of Job, came to express their condolence. His condition was worse than they had imagined. Hence, “When they saw him from afar, they did not recognize him; and they raised their voices and wept; and they rent their robes and sprinkled dust in the air upon their heads. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (Job 2, 12-13).

The response they gave to the lamentations of Job did not console him at all as they gave the age-old explanations for his suffering. They told him that God would not punish the just and so he was suffering the punishment for some crime he committed. So, they advised him to repent and ask forgiveness from God. Then God would give him health, wealth and family back. The three friends took turn in giving him this advice again and again but they could not prove his sins or lead him to repentance.

Job remained firm in his conviction that he was innocent. He demanded to see God face to face for sending him such a great punishment and to ask him a single question: What crime did I commit to receive such a punishment? But, there was utter silence on the part of God and that drowned him in deeper sorrow. “Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat!...and I should be acquitted forever by my judge. “Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him; on the left hand I seek him, but I cannot behold him; I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see him” (Job 23, 3-9).

The Book of Job challenges the age-old view that the wicked would be punished with poverty and suffering on this

earth, while the just would prosper. It is a powerful drama that discusses the theme, the suffering of the just. While the three friends departed disappointed for failing to lead Job to repentance, a new character named Elihu came on the scene and questioned the arrogance of Job for daring to question the actions of God. However, he also failed to give a satisfying answer. Finally God came on the scene and made Job aware of the mystery of the plan of God and then Job became silent and bowed his head before the Divine plan.

Job confessed his ignorance and asked for forgiveness from God. “Then Job answered the LORD: ‘I know that thou can’t do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me. ‘I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore, I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes’” (Job 42, 1-6). The “suffering of the just” remains to be a mystery. The book of Job only points to this mystery but gives no definite response. By stating in the introduction that God was testing the faith and fidelity of Job, the sacred author presents a very important truth.

Job suffered not because he committed any sin but to prove his faith and fidelity to God. It was planned by God to provide Job an opportunity to prove his unfailing fidelity to Him. Job who proved to be totally faithful was restored all that was lost to him. The story of Job was written at a time, when the truth about the life after death was not revealed to the people of God. It remains to be a mystery why the just and the wicked do not receive the reward according to their actions. In this book, we can see an attempt to go beyond this life, get a glimpse of eternal life.

“Oh! That my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were graven in the rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!” (Job 19, 23-27). Did Job say this about healing or about life after death? There are different opinions among the Bible scholars regarding this. If we take into consideration the prologue of the story, a conclusion can be drawn that it points to the hope of healing. Then, the “suffering of the just” remains an unanswered question.

The suffering of the Just is a challenge to the faithful at all times. If a just God is controlling everything why is it that the wicked prosper while the just undergo suffering? Various answers have been given at various times. The general explanation is that sin is the cause of all the suffering a person encounters. But it is not the sinner but those who do only good, often goes through physical suffering and material poverty. Hence it is a question still searching for an answer.

Slowly the Bible revealed the truth that “good and evil” will not be finished in this world by receiving reward or punishment. There is a life after death. Life on earth is only a preparation for eternal life. Therefore a conviction and faith developed that the lasting punishment and reward will be received only after death. The teaching of Jesus and His resurrection are the basis for this conviction and faith. The parable of the “rich man and Lazarus” was an example of this teaching. The rich man who feasted in luxury ignored the poor man starving at his door step and when they died the rich man went to hell and Lazarus went to heaven to enjoy everlasting happiness (Lk 16, 19-31).

Those who do good on earth would receive their reward in heaven. “But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (Lk 14, 14). The teaching of Jesus, the promises He made and the warnings He gave were aimed at eternal life. The instruction He gave about the final judgment leaves no room for doubt that it refers to the eternal life. “When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne... “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. ... Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Mt 25, 31-46).

Jesus taught that we would have to give an account of our life at the moment of our death and only then we would receive the eternal punishment or eternal reward. The followers of Jesus still believe it and teach the same to others. However, the question remains regarding the suffering of the just. How can it agree with the justice of God? We do not have a definite answer as the mystery of God’s plan has not been fully revealed during this life. The experience of Jesus points to this direction.

Jesus taught that if we ask, we would get. But Jesus did not receive the only thing He asked for. The night before He died, He prayed, sweating blood. “Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done”(Lk 22, 42). The “cup” was not removed but He was given the strength to drink the “cup” as it was part of the prayer, “nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done”.

We might not understand the meaning of the suffering at the time we experience it. But, we would learn in time that there is a place for everything in the plan of God. What we need is a firm conviction that it is the Father who loves me and desires to have only what is best for me, guides and directs my life. Such a faith would enable us to rejoice in all the situations. The Bible quotation from the Book of Prophet Habakkuk, cited in the beginning, is a clear example for it.

Prophet Habakkuk preached at a time when the land was encountering a very difficult time. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon had defeated all the kingdoms in the region. In 598 B.C., he captured Jerusalem and imprisoned thousands and took them to Babylon as slaves. He plundered the Jerusalem Temple and took all the valuable things in it. Judah was forced to give a large amount as tribute to Babylon. Bible Scholars think that it was during this time that Prophet Habakkuk came on the scene. The last three verses were the answer to the people who were searching for the meaning of their suffering. The Prophet calls on the people to rejoice in the Lord even in the midst of all the miseries and suffering they were to enduring. “Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like hinds' feet, he makes me tread upon my high places” (Hab 3, 17-19).



In spite of all the material loss, if one anchors one's hope in the Lord, there will be joy deep within the heart. For that person the Lord is the strength. There is nothing impossible for one who trusts in God. All that was lost will be restored; there will be an end to all the injustice; as one keeps this faith as his source of life. "He whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith" (Hab 2.4). Believing does not mean mere approval of certain truths but total abandonment into the hands of God, confessing that God owns my life. "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Rom 8, 31). Therefore there is no need of fear or despair; rejoice in the Lord, exult in the God of salvation!

## 2.

### Unending Love of God

*“Gone is my glory, and my expectation from the LORD.” Remember my affliction and my bitterness, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion”, says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him” (Lam 3, 18-24).*

Terrible was the destruction of Jerusalem. Prophets had warned about it and called upon the people for repentance. But, the people did not give ear to the call of the Prophets. During the last days an array of powerful prophets such as Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum and Habakkuk insistently called the people to return to the Lord and warned about the terrible consequences if they refused to do so.

However, the king and priests, encouraged by false prophets trusted in political alliance; they never thought of conversion, or changing their sways of life. The call of the true prophets for conversion fell on deaf ears. The people, who were misguided by their official leaders, finally experienced the terrible disaster. It was a bitter experience that was caused by the breaking of the covenant and disobeying the command of God.

In B.C. 598, Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem and took thousands as prisoners and as slaves to Babylon. Israel had to give a large amount as tribute to Babylon. Two years after Babylon withdrew, Israel stopped paying the tribute. False prophets announced that Babylon will be destroyed and the deported captives would come back. The people believed them and they thought that they can defeat Babylon with the help of Egypt, in case they came back for war. The priests supported them. Prophet Jeremiah's warnings fell on deaf ears and his message that was contrary to the false prophets was suppressed. They wanted to kill him but finally decided to keep him in prison. (Jer 7, 18-21; 26-28).

Against all their hopes and expectations, Nebuchadnezzar returned not to defeat but to destroy. He laid siege to Jerusalem and in one and half years the city was ruined. People starved and tried to sustain their lives by eating the body of the dead. At the end the enemy broke the wall and entered the city. There was blood shed as the army slaughtered the people, young and old, indiscriminately. Palaces and the Temple were burned to ashes. The remaining people were taken as slaves to Babylon. King Zedekiah, the last King of the line of David, blinded and chained led the march of slaves.

It looked like total destruction, as if the history of Israel has come to full circle. Now they have ended up in slavery as at the beginning. With strong and outstretched arm God had liberated the people of Israel from the slavery in Egypt, brought them to the land of Canaan and from them raised a powerful empire under the leadership of David. The people who broke the laws of the Covenant are being punished according to the conditions of the Covenant. The people believed that everything is over with them. This was the historical background of the book of Lamentations.

Once it was believed that it was Prophet Jeremiah who wrote the book of Lamentations, but the modern Bible scholars

are of the opinion that it is not Jeremiah but someone else who wrote it. But who wrote it, no one knows for certain. It is not so important to decide who wrote the book. The Church assures that it was written according to the inspiration received from God and so it is accepted as the word of God. What is more important is the content of the book, the lesson it imparts.

In this book, the people of Israel are depicted as a mother who lost everything. Her children were either killed or taken as slaves to a faraway country, Babylon. The mother, daughter of Zion, laments over the miseries of her children recounting them one by one. “How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the cities has become a vassal. She weeps bitterly in the night, tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies” (Lam 1, 1-2).

She knew that it was the punishment of the Lord for their continuous disobedience and infidelity to the Covenant with God. “My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand” (Lam 1, 14). People became unfaithful following the instructions of the leaders. The priests and prophets, who should have preached the true Word of God without watering it down, failed to teach them the way of the Lord and consequently made them to walk down the path of destruction. “Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen for you oracles false and misleading” (Lam 2, 14).

The suffering of the people especially during the time of the siege was beyond imagination. Who was responsible for all these

miseries? The fall of Jerusalem has much to teach us. “Look, O LORD, and see! With whom has't thou dealt thus? Should women eat their offspring, the children of their tender care? Should priest and prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord?” (Lam 4, 10). “The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food in the destruction of the daughter of my people” (Lam 4, 10). “This was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in the midst of her the blood of the righteous” (Lam 4, 13).

They failed to keep the conditions of the Covenant God had made with them and to listen to the warnings given by the Lord through true prophets. The people preferred to listen to the false prophets who were promising peace and prosperity, not calling for conversion and change of life. These false prophets and the priests who supported them are the main culprits whom Prophet Jeremiah confronts with severe criticism and strong warnings. “From the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, every one deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer 6, 13-14). The leaders who were supposed to lead the people went astray as they were filled with greed for material gain. It was like the blind leading the blind and both fell into the pit.

The total destruction was primarily caused by the failures of the leaders. “In the prophets of Samaria I saw an unsavory thing: they prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray. But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his wickedness; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah” (Jer 23, 13-14). Though they prophesied in the name of the Lord they were not communicating the Word of God. They preached with selfish motivations that aimed

at material profit. "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams which they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal?" (Jer 23, 25-27). Such misguiding leadership continued until everything was destroyed.

The experience of Israel, vividly Painted in the lamentations of Zion, is a valuable lesson for all, all the time. The contemporary prophets of today seem to avoid real conversion, and promise material prosperity in response to their prayers. Attracted by their preaching thousands gather for miracle cure and material gains. Such people need to pause a moment in the presence of the "Daughter of Zion" who is crying, sitting in the midst of the ruined city, burying her face in her hands; she laments recalling the misfortune and suffering of her children. This book of Lamentation is a reminder that it could happen to us also. If we go after riches and luxury, forsaking the path of the Cross, Jesus showed us, where will we reach? Lamentation of Zion is a warning and a challenge!

Into this gloomy picture of total despair, a ray of hope flashes like a lightning, in the words of the prophet that recalls the unending love of the Lord. The people have to realize that all the disaster was the result of their sins and infidelity to the Covenant of God. The Lamenting mother was awakening to another realization that God would not break the promises He made. Though He would discipline the faithful through punishment, He would not abandon them forever. The punishment was meant to force the people to return to Him.

Three things in the poem of hope, quoted at the beginning of this article, deserve special attention. "The steadfast **love** of

the LORD never ceases, his **mercies** never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy **faithfulness**” (Lam 3, 22-23).

**1. Love:** The root of the word in Hebrew is “Hezed”. This is the love that was guaranteed through the Covenant. It never ends, never fades or becomes less. Even if people are unfaithful, God would remain faithful as it is His nature. “He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. . . . Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. . . . Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. . . . God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn 8-16). This love was translated as Agape in Greek. No matter what the other one does, even if one hurts, offends, betrays, the love would remain undiminished and wish that only the good may happen to the other. That is the nature of God’s love.

**2. Mercy:** This is the translation of the original Hebrew word “Rehamim”. It is derived from the root “Rehem” which means womb. The love and mercy of God is compared to the natural, tender love, a mother feels towards a baby in her womb. This word points to the motherly instinct of God. The love of a mother comes not in consideration of the merit of the one loved but seeing the helpless condition and need of the person. A similar feeling was aroused in the Good Samaritan, seeing a man bleeding to death on the way side. He cared for him even though he did not know the one lying on the ground, and did not expect anything in return for the help he was giving. That is real love. Seeing a sudden accident, our stomach experiences a kind of tension that would move us to action, one feels compassion to the person and that is the kind of mercy God has to the helpless suffering people. This feeling is called mercy, compassion or sympathy that creates a feeling of suffering with the other person. God is not indifferent to the suffering of

His people as He rejoices with the man filled with joy and feels compassion to the person who is suffering. It is in Him the lamenting “Daughter of Zion” finds consolation.

**3. Fidelity:** This is the translation of the Hebrew word “Emuna” which means faithfulness that never changes. It comes from the word “Aman-Amen”. Once we say “Amen” at the end of a prayer, nothing will be added to it. That is the character of God. His Word will never change. What God tells will be fulfilled. Many times God repeated through the Prophets that “He will not abandon the people” and know that He will be faithful to His word.

Steadfast Love, unfailing mercy and fidelity are some of the characteristics of the nature of God. There is no sin that God cannot forgive and that is the source of our hope. Even when we have lost everything and even when we are in utter despair, we must keep this faith in God, deep in our hearts.

There is no end to the love of God. It is new every morning and it strengthens our hope that enkindles joy. Hence, no one who believes in God, in Jesus Christ, would need to despair. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3, 16).

Hence we rejoice also in our weakness. “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom 5, 3-5). When we uncover the love of God, we would find joy in suffering, failures, and persecution. Though there is no change in the situation, we would experience joy inside our hearts. God can fill us with His steadfast love and joy. May the Lord open our eyes to see, to experience that unfailing, endless love!



### 3.

## A New Heart

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

The Covenant God made with the people of Israel was based on certain conditions: “Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine” (Ex 19, 5). As long as they abide with the conditions of the Covenant, God will accept them as His own people. But, if they become unfaithful by breaking the commandments, the Covenant will be cancelled and they would lose the status of being the chosen people of God.

That is what happened in the history of Israel. At the very moment the covenant was instituted it was broken. When Moses was receiving the “Ten Commandments” on the summit of the mountain, in the valley, Aaron was busy making an idol for the people to worship. The history that continued was filled with

infidelity, ingratitude and disobedience. An end to this history of infidelity came with the Exile in Babylon. The warnings given through the Prophet Jeremiah: “The men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant which they made before me, I will make like the calf which they cut in two and passed between its parts ... the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf” (Jer 34, 18-19), were fulfilled. The people who broke the covenant were punished according to the provisions envisaged in the very act of establishing the covenant, or rather “Cutting the Covenant” as it was called in Hebrew. In order to understand the term and the seriousness of the covenant it would be helpful to remember how a covenant was made in ancient times.

The two people who enter into a Covenant would bring a calf each. The calves will be cut into pieces and set apart in two piles. Then, the two people engaging in the Covenant will walk in the middle of those pieces, holding hands. This was a powerful and visual reminder that signifies that even if one has to be cut into pieces like the piles of meat, he would keep the laws of the Covenant. At the same time there is a warning that if the Covenant is broken, the one who breaks the covenant would be cut to pieces like those animals. In the book of Genesis, we see Abraham witnessing such a sign (Gen 15, 17-18). There, in the symbol of fire, only God passed through the pieces because the Covenant made with Abraham was unconditional. But the Covenant at Sinai was not unconditional. There were conditions set by God and accepted by the people.

The Covenant was broken. The inevitable punishment fell on the People of God. They lost the Promised Land and were driven out into slavery. What next? The Covenant at Sinai gave the laws but did not give the strength to keep them. People did

not have the capacity to do what was required and refrain from doing that which was forbidden. It was this condition, St. Paul depicts as a lamentation: “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me....Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7, 14-24).

The general condition of the people is presented through the personal experience of the Apostle. Human beings under the dominion of sin need to undergo a total transformation to be able to obey the Commandments of God. No matter how good the laws are and how forcefully they are imposed, unless there is an internal change, goodness will not become a reality in the world. Though one wishes to do good one ends up doing evil and that means there is an evil force in man. This is what is being revealed through the experience of the people of Israel and the confession of St. Paul. It is not an old story but something still continues with the people. What is the solution for this problem? What can one do? Paul himself gives the answer: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin” (Rom 7,23-24).

What was impossible for man under the dominion of sin was made possible through Jesus Christ. Therefore, Paul could rejoice in his weakness and failures. “If we hope for what we do

not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8, 25-26). When Paul complained and prayed to take away his weakness, the response he got from God was consoling and satisfying. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”. So Paul could state with confidence and joy: “I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12, 9-10). The Apostle who confessed his weakness and trusted in the power of God, experienced the power of God working through him and he said, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil 4,13).

Ezekiel witnessed such an empowering. He saw God working through the powerlessness of man. The old Covenant was based on law. God will make a different Covenant with man that would not only prescribe what to do and what not to do but also give the strength to obey it. It is sin that makes the inner man weak and subject to sin. According to the Bible the decisions are made by the heart and so change should take place in the heart to act according to the will of God.

Two things are needed here: 1. Purification from the dominion of sin and 2. Empowering of the heart. God promised these two through the prophet. By sprinkling the pure water, people will be purified from the stain of sin. God spoke through the prophet using the symbolic cleansing that existed in Israel. Sprinkling the water signifies also giving the Holy Spirit. Instead of the heart that was corrupted by sin, God would give a new heart that listens to the promptings of the Spirit. The Spirit of God would dwell in the heart as a force that is submissive only to God.

In the place of the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets, a new Covenant, written on the walls of the heart, was promised. With that people will be given strength to obey the laws of God, the precepts of the Covenant, not by some outside force but by the inspiration they receive from inside and that will be strengthened by the indwelling Spirit of God. Prophet Isaiah also spoke about such an inner power. “Though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it,” when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left” (Is 30, 20-21).

The prophet was promising a New Covenant, a New Heart and a New Spirit to give hope to the people. This promise was made not only through Ezekiel but also through prophet Jeremiah. “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer 31, 31-34). This Covenant would last forever, the prophet assured the people.

The Prophets continued to instruct the people to believe in the promises of God and to experience the joy and hope

that emerges from that faith. However in order to witness the fulfillment of these promises about the New Covenant they had to wait five centuries, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. During the Last Supper Jesus took the cup, gave thanks to the Father and said, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk 22, 20).

It is the blood of Christ that would wash away our sins. "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me" (Jn 13, 8). From the heart that was pierced on the cross, came water and blood (Jn 19, 34). The water was the symbol of the Holy Spirit. The promise of pure water, new spirit, new heart and all the other promises were fulfilled in Jesus Christ who was lifted up on the Cross. The source of forgiveness of sin was clarified through the explanation, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26, 28).

What was promised through the prophets was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The New Covenant was sealed in the blood of Christ. New spirit was poured into us through the Holy Spirit. As the Apostle said, it is a New Creation: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5, 17). The "old man under the domain of sin" was stripped off and put on the new self. "Be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4, 23-24). Then worries will be gone and the heart will be filled with joy. To make it possible, listen with a spirit of submission that came from faith to the Holy Spirit who dwells in your heart

## 4.

### In the Valley of dry Bones

*“Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them: Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken, and I have done it, says the LORD” (Ez 37, 11-14).*

In 598 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem and took thousands as prisoners to Babylon and imposed heavy tribute on Israel. Ezekiel was one of the persons taken to Babylon. His prophetic mission started with the vision he had at the banks of River Chebar and he preached mainly among the people of Israel in exile. The first part of his prophecy (1-33) dealt with the warnings about punishments and call to conversion. For a few years the people of Israel submitted to the Babylonian rule and paid the tribute. But then as Babylon was caught up in internal crisis many false prophets promised the people that Babylon will soon be destroyed, the deported people will soon come back to Jerusalem and hence there was no need to pay the tribute any

more. Besides, they convinced the political leaders that even if Babylon were to come back, with the help of Egypt they could defend themselves and repulse the enemy.

Thus they stopped paying tribute and revolted against Babylon. But Babylon suppressed the internal rebellions and did come back to Jerusalem, a second time, in 588, not to conquer and subdue, but to destroy. The Babylonian army, after a siege of about 18 months took the city, destroyed the walls, burnt down palaces and the temple was reduced to a heap of rubble and ashes. Thousands were killed, and many more taken captives and led away as slaves to Babylon, leaving only a very few people who were poor and of no importance in the city (2Kings 25,1-17). Everything ended and there was no source of hope. The book of Lamentations tells how great was the loss and how terrible was the impact of those atrocities that threw people into deep depression.

They felt that God had abandoned them. Their condition was like that of dry bones. It was at this time, the Prophet came on the scene with new messages from God that could enkindle hope in the hearts of the people. Ezekiel communicated the message of hope from God, through visions, parables and symbolic actions.

If the first part of the book dealt with the impending disaster (1-33), the second part (34-48) presented messages that would give hope to the people. God will enter into history and liberate His people from the slavery and will bring them back to their Promised Land, Israel. This was the message of hope and source of joy.

One of the main prophecies of hope is presented through the parable of the dry bones and its explanation. "The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full



of bones. And he led me round among them; and behold, there were very many upon the valley; and lo, they were very dry” (Ez 37, 1-2). All know that dry bones can never become alive again. God reminded the prophet that the people of Israel considered themselves as dry bones that can never become alive again.

However, what is impossible for man is possible for God. It was proven through the command and vision the prophet received. “So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host” (Ez 37,8-10). Ezekiel saw that God who created man from the dust could bring dry bones to life and make them His own people again.

The vision of dry bones and their coming to life teaches a great lesson. That is what God will do to the people of Israel who were in exile at the moment. The people were scattered into different parts of Babylon as slaves and prisoners. But, God will gather them again through a process that would remind one of the liberation from Egypt. They will be brought back to the Promised Land. It will be like a second Exodus or a new creation. Hence, they should stop crying, fill the hearts with joy and believe in the promises of God that would lead them to hope and happiness.

This message and prophecy are still relevant today as we hear messages of despair all over. News about the changing weather

and depressing political conditions seem to eliminate even any rays of hope. Predictions about the upcoming disaster and end of the world could throw many into a feeling of despair. The scientists have predicted that the earth is at the verge of a disaster and the signs we see all around apparently confirm the possibility.

Monsoon winds that change directions, unexpected heavy rains and eruptions on the land coupled with tornadoes that destroy all the agricultural products and homes and even human lives; added to that steadily increasing global warming, and frequent earthquakes and exploding volcanoes point to more and more disasters. Wild animals and pests destroy the years of toil by the people. The earth itself seems to lose its balance.

Behind the natural disasters come man-made calamities. Air pollution and water pollution could create a situation that we would have to pay for drinking water and breathing air. Small merchants and small farmers are being pushed into utter poverty. In the face of total disaster, many find consolation in suicide. At the same time all the wealth of the country is being sold to a few rich people. Their luxury and needless spending are increasing for which the political leaders pave the way. The political authority seems to have no concern about ruining the nation or moving the majority into utter poverty.

The various religious groups used to live in harmony but they are pushed against each other by injecting into them religious fanaticism and enmity. Religious wars with political motivation have rendered millions of People homeless. No one knows the number of people rendered refugees and those who die on the way seeking food and refuge. People who lived for generation in a country are all on a sudden denied citizenship, are called foreigners and sent to evacuation camps. Violence is on the increase, and it would seem that we are sitting on a smoking volcano that could go off at any moment

Are we standing in the valley of dry bones that Ezekiel saw? Here is where we see the relevance of the vision of Ezekiel today. Only God can give life to the dry bones. He who created the universe from nothing can enter into our miserable situation and make it a new creation. We have to trust in the power and mercy of the Lord.

Hope, not sadness and despair, is the sign of one who believes in Jesus Christ. At the same time one must listen to the voice of God and build up a healthy value system. Listen and obey one's conscience, the voice from within. If we pay attention we would hear the directions God gives us and if we follow it we would be on the right path. "And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it, when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left".

The control of the universe is in the hands of God and so we do not have to worry or be anxious. To fill our hearts with joy, we have to listen to the Word of God; think of good things and act with love, renouncing selfishness and thinking of what is good for the other. "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil 2, 4). "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4, 6-7). Hence rejoice in the Lord as the salvation is at hand. It will be like a new creation.

## 5.

# God Reigns

*“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns”. Hark, your watchmen lift up their voice, together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion” (Is 52, 7-8).*

They were in utter despair. Having lost everything, the Children of Abraham were living in Babylon almost like slaves. They were the chosen people of Yahweh who had received the promise that they will be the people of God forever; God will not abandon them. But, now they were reduced into a situation worse than they endured in Egypt. Why did it happen?

The army of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, captured Jerusalem in 587 B.C., demolished the walls of Jerusalem, destroyed the palaces and burned down the Temple. All the leaders, people of influence and wealth, were taken as prisoners and led away to Babylon as captives. The slaves God liberated from Egypt with a strong hand and outstretched arm became slaves again and a cycle was completed. What happened to the Covenant at Sinai and to the promises of God guaranteed by that Covenant?

People sinking into despair were given various explanations. Some believed that those who broke the Covenant were punished according to the conditions of the Covenant. The prophets had warned that there will be severe punishment if they broke the conditions of the Covenant. Of the warnings, the most obvious was the one given through Prophet Jeremiah, “You have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty, everyone to his brother and to his neighbor; ... I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant which they made before me, I will make like the calf which they cut in two and passed between its parts” (Jer 34, 17-18). The people became aware that the punishment Jeremiah had warned was the punishment for the sins committed by Israel for generations.

The book of “Lamentations” is a confession of those sins. “Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities” (Lam 5, 7). Not only the sins of the ancestors but also the sins of those who are experiencing the slavery invited this disaster. “My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand” (Lam 1, 14). This is the punishment for infidelity. They felt that God had abandoned them.

However, there were a few who thought that the punishment was meant to be salvific. It was meant to bring to the awareness of their own sinfulness and infidelity, and thus lead them to repentance and real conversion. The prophets had repeatedly told them that the punishment was not to destroy but to purify. “For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer”

(Is 54, 7-8). The Babylonian captivity was to purify the people. Those who are washed pure through the miseries of captivity will be brought back to the Promised Land.

Among the people of Israel another dangerous line of thought crept in. The concept at the time was that each people had their own gods. The wars between the peoples were considered as the wars between their gods. Whoever wins is supposed to have a stronger god. This line of thought existed already during the time of Exodus. God of Israel was stronger than the gods of Egypt and that power was manifested through the liberation of the slaves. The people of Israel believed that their God, Yahweh is stronger and above all the other gods. Through the Babylon captivity, that faith was challenged.

How can they think that Yahweh who could not protect not only His people but even His own dwelling place, the Temple, be considered as the Almighty God? Could it be that Murdock whom the people of Babylon worshiped was mightier? If so, were they to worship Murdock? This kind of thinking was dangerous, destructive and it created a condition in which the people were tempted to forsake their faith in Yahweh. It was under these circumstances that the prophet was sent to the people to proclaim the Good News quoted at the beginning of this chapter(Is 52, 7-8).

The prophet spoke using the concept that the wars were fought between gods. It was Yahweh, the God of Israel, who is fighting against Babylon who destroyed His temple and city and took His people captives. On the one hand, the prophet tells the people that it was God who punished them according to the conditions set forth in the precepts of the Covenant, but on the other hand he affirms that Babylon has crossed the limits set for them by Yahweh, and so they will be punished. Thus, the prophet depicts that the war was between Yahweh who made

Israel His chosen people and the gods of Babylon who keep His people as slaves. However, here is more to it.

The prophet sees Israel as a mother who weeps for her lost children. A number of attributes were given to the people of Israel such as “Virgin daughter of Zion”; “Daughter of Jerusalem”; “Mother of Lamentation”; “The faithful bride of the Lord”; “A prostitute who became unfaithful through idol worship” etc. It is still common that the people are presented through the symbol of a person, Motherland for example. The prophet was speaking to the mother who is weeping over her children.

Zion bend down and crying must now lift her head, look up and see the Mount of Olives that rose on the northern side of Zion. There on the Mount of Olives appear the footsteps of the messenger coming from Babylon running. What is the importance of the footsteps? It is not the feet that is important but the message he is bringing. There is only one and only one message. “Your God reigns”. The origin of this in Hebrew is “Malak, Eloheyka”. This is presented as the Good News. Hearing it the guards shout of joy. Four words in this proclamation deserve special attention: Proclaim the good news, peace, salvation and Your God Reigns.

**1. Proclaim the good news:** The Hebrew word is “Bashar” which means good news and happy message. This word is translated into Greek as “Evangalion” that came from “Evuangelisesthai”. Evangelization and proclamation of the Gospel come from these words. This is being said to a mother who thinks that her children were lost forever. This word became later the center of the New Testament. Introducing his Book as “The Good News of Jesus Christ” (Mk 1, 1) Mark uses the same words. Good news lifts one from the abyss of despair to the summit of joy.

**2. *Peace:*** Peace is part of the good news being communicated. The Hebrew origin is “Shalom”, a state in which persons, things and incidents exist according to the plan of God. Four kinds of relationships are envisaged here: relationship between man and God; relationship between the people; relationship between the person and universe and also between the creatures; and finally the relationship of a person to himself. A state of total harmony is meant by the word “Shalom”. It is peace and also the paradise. Here nobody hurts another, nobody dominates another. The will of God is manifested in the full sense. That is what was proclaimed by the messenger who brought the good news. It gives joy to the city that was shattered in the war and also to the people enslaved.

**3. *Salvation:*** Just as Shalom, this is also presented as the content of the proclamation. It is presented in parallel to the good news and shalom. It is called “Synonymous Parallelism”. Salvation is used in parallel to Shalom and at the same time it is presented as an explanation. The origin in Hebrew is “Shewa” which stands for all the gifts of God. This word “Shewa” is used to depict liberation from slavery; a life with God; being filled with the love of God; partaking in the Divine life. The word “Joshua” came from this word. The origin of the word “Jesus” was from two words namely Yahweh + Shewa = Yehosha = Joshua. Name of Jesus is the greatest example to denote the meaning of the word. It is the messenger who announced peace and salvation. What does it mean? What message is being given to Zion who lost her children? What is the basis of peace and salvation? The answer is: Your God reigns.

**4. *Your God Reigns:*** The Prophet gives an answer to the people of Israel who think that the basic reason for their suffering was that their God was defeated. Now the messenger assures: In the war against Babylon, God of Israel has won the battle. The



salvation history is depicted as a conflict between good and evil - God and Satan. Often the evil accomplishes apparent victory and the good appears to lose. The just is persecuted and suffer misfortunes while the wicked grow like palms and become strong, having power and wealth.

This is a serious problem for faith, faced by not only the Israel in exile in Babylon but by all. Why is it that the evil seems to be more powerful than good? This paves way to question the power and even the very existence of God. Who controls the movements in the universe? Is there anyone in charge or are they mere natural phenomena? The words of the prophet shed light into this complex situation.

*“MalakEloheika”* is the Hebrew root of the statement. *“Eloheika”* means “Your God”. The word *“Melek”* could be translated as the King. *“Malak”* is its verbal form which means become king; rule the kingdom, administer the kingdom etc. King is the authority of all. People are to live according to the wish of the king. By announcing God reigns, the prophet was saying that He has defeated all the enemies, and is establishing His rule. In other words, God executes His will completely in this world. There, no one will enslave anyone; no one will rule over others. All will be free as they all are the children of God. This is one of the characteristics of the Rule of God. This is the good news that would turn the tears of the lamenting Zion into great joy.

The people of Israel returning to Jerusalem will be the visible sign of God’s victory. It was to announce their return that the messenger came running ahead of them. The people in exile will not be coming back alone. God will be with them like a shepherd leading the sheep. This is the main message of the prophet Second Isaiah, “Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; . . . He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Is 40, 10-11).

God is victorious and He is the King. His rule will guarantee freedom and joy to the people. Therefore, “Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean. Shake yourself from the dust, arise, O captive Jerusalem; loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter of Zion” (Is 52, 1-2). When God is ruling He will not allow anyone to make His children slaves. That will be the foundation for real joy and freedom.

The state of a kingdom ruled by God is called “The Kingdom of God” in the Bible. Jesus started His preaching, proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God. “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God, is at hand; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mk 1, 15). The central point of the message of Jesus and His teaching was “The Kingdom of God”. His teaching explained the nature of the Kingdom of God and proclaimed the challenges it involved. The Kingdom of God begins in this world but its completion would come only in the future. Jesus instructed His followers to pray for it. “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6, 10).

“Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Lk 17,21). The Kingdom of God is not limited to a geographical area. It includes all the peoples of the world, and would renew the face of the earth. The earth will be ruled by God. “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14, 17). It is that joy God is giving through Jesus Christ. We need to believe it and accept it.

## 6.

### **In The House of Lord**

*“How lovely is thy dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God” (Ps 84, 1-2).*

All would agree that what all people most want is to be happy. All want pure happiness that never ends. All the efforts, toils, hopes and desires of all the people are for this end. It is God who placed this unending thirst for happiness in the hearts of people. But nobody gets pure happiness that is not stained by sadness and pain in this world, is the bitter truth.

Unfortunately one does not find the pure happiness because he often turns in the wrong direction searching for happiness. What do I need to find true happiness? How can one find fulfillment in one' life? There are some go after accumulating material wealth thinking it would make them happy. Some would use any method to make money with the assumption that the joy money gives would justify the means they applied. In their enthusiasm to make money, they forget all the other values. When the wealth is accumulated in the hands of a few, the majority will be thrown into utter poverty. Those who accumulate wealth do not know to say “enough”. Neither

would they know real happiness. The poor who are struggling to meet the ends also are not happy.

I remember an experience I had about 50 years ago while I was studying Theology in Rome. During the mid-summer vacation I took part in a work camp planned for University students. It was conducted in the town of Ivrea, near Turin in the Northern part of Italy. There were more than 100 students from different countries. Our job was to go from house to house and collect things that are useless or thrown out. We were to bring those things to the camp, sort them out and prepare them for sale.

Abbe Pierre,S.J. was the one who organized the camp. Something he said once still remains afresh in my mind. He said, “There are only two kinds of people in the world: those who are wealthy and those who are poor; or those who have bread and those who have none; or those who are hungry and those who have no hunger. Both groups cannot sleep. Those who have no food cannot sleep because of hunger. Those who have bread cannot sleep because he is afraid that someone would steal their wealth. Therefore, my young friends, you must do one thing. I will teach you a short prayer that you should repeat every morning and evening.

Now comes to the prayer! “God, our Creator and Provider of bread, help us to give bread to those who have hunger and hunger to those who have bread”. Though simple, slowly I came to the awareness that this prayer teaches a deep truth. “For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (Mk 8, 36).No matter how much wealth one has, one will not be really happy as no material wealth and luxury can make a person happy. The more one accumulates the more one wants. It is like drinking sea water to quench thirst; the more one drinks the more thirsty one becomes.

This thirst for happiness began from the moment man was put out of the Paradise because he ate the forbidden fruit. Bible presents this truth in the form of a story. The core message of the story is that man has moved away from God, the source of life and happiness. The thirst within is the invitation God sends us to come back to Him. It will not be satisfied until we become one with God. St. Augustine said it beautifully, “Until I rest in you Lord, my mind will be restless; my heart will not be content; like the waves that seek the shore, I come searching for you”. The thirst is for God and that will continue until the soul reaches Him. Then only our joy would become complete.

This inner thirst teaches us that human life is a pilgrimage searching for the presence of God. The pilgrimages we make to holy places are symbol of our ultimate journey. Almost all the religions have pilgrim centers both big and small. Some of the examples are Benares, Jerusalem Rome, Lourdes, Fatima Mecca, etc. Add to that there are local pilgrim centers such as Velankanni, Malayatoor, Vallarpadam etc. in every country. The pilgrim centers are places where the presence of God was experienced in a special way. The hope of partaking in that experience is the motivating force behind all the pilgrimages. All the faithful would wish to visit at least some of the important pilgrim centers. The devotees are willing to accept any amount of suffering to visit those places as the thirst for experiencing the presence of God is that strong.

The Bible, especially the Old Testament encourages the faithful to visit the most important pilgrim centers. For the Jewish religion and that is Jerusalem. They had only one Temple that is Jerusalem. Though David desired to build the Temple, it was Solomon who built and consecrated it to Yahweh. By the fact that four chapters of the Bible (1 Kings 5-8) are set apart for the description of the construction of the Temple, is a convincing evidence for the importance Bible gives to the Temple.

The focal point of the Temple was the holy of holies where the Ark of the Covenant that contained the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written, was preserved. The throne placed above the Ark, in between two Cherubs, was considered as the seat of God. When the consecration service was completed, a cloud descended on the Temple. “When the priests came out of the holy place, 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). From that day onwards, the Temple in Jerusalem became the house of God and it was considered to be the place to meet God on earth.

People came to Jerusalem searching for the presence of God. They came in great number for three most important festivals: Passover, Pentecost and the feast of the Tabernacles. All the Jewish people visited Jerusalem at least once in their life time during one of those Feasts. The pilgrims came, singing Psalms and songs that proclaimed the glory of God present in the Temple and the city that housed the Temple.

Six of the 150 Psalms are called the Canticles of Zion (Ps 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122) as the pilgrims sang them while ascending the hill on which the Temple of Jerusalem was built. All those Psalms proclaim the unending thirst of human souls to experience the presence of God. Being in the Temple meant to be with God and they have only one thing to do and that was proclaim the love of the Lord, to praise the Lord, and announce the great things God has done in the lives of the people of Israel. The faithful had a foretaste of the presence of God. “Blessed are those who dwell in Thy house, ever singing thy praise! Blessed are the men whose strength is in Thee, in whose heart are the highways to Zion” (Ps 84, 4-5). Apparently the Psalmist was thinking of the priests and Levites who lived in the

Temple, but in between the lines we can see the zeal and hope of the human soul.

“For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness” (Ps 84, 10). No material gain or position would satisfy the hunger of the soul for the presence of God. To understand the usage of the court of the Lord, one needs to understand the structure of the Temple.

The room where the Ark of the Covenant was kept is known as the holy of holies, was 30 feet long and 30 feet wide, it was separated from the rest of the building with a thick curtain (1 Kgs 6, 20). Inside of the room was covered with gold. In front of it was the holy place which was 60 feet long, and 45’ height (1 Kings 6, 3). In front of it was the Altar of sacrifice around which was the court only the priests were allowed to enter. In front of it was the court where men of Israel could assemble. Fifteen feet below was the court of the women of Israel. Around it there were large courts where the Gentiles could come.

The Temple Herod re-built, filled forty acres of land. Living in the corner of this Temple compound was considered to be the happiest experience for the Psalmist. It is the house of God where he could experience the presence of God. The same theme is present in all the Zion Canticles. It is a truth that all the pilgrims keep in their hearts and sing out loudly. “God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God will help her right early.... The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Come, behold the works of the LORD, ... He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; ... “Be still, and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations. I am exalted in the earth!” (Ps 46, 5-10). The presence of the Lord would confirm protection, eliminating fear and filling the hearts with joy. It is this experience that the pilgrims are searching. It is for this that

they come to Jerusalem. “Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. Within her citadels God has shown himself a sure defense” (Ps 48, 1-3).

The Assyrian army that destroyed the Northern Kingdom, Israel, in B.C.722, under Sennacherib invaded the Southern Kingdom, Judah in 701. They laid siege to the city of Jerusalem but by the Divine intervention they were forced to lift siege and withdraw. This historical event is described in detail in 2 Kings 18-19. “That night the angel of the LORD went forth, and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies” (2 Kings 19, 35). The terrified Assyrian army immediately left the attempt to capture Jerusalem and fled in panic.

This incident made an impact in the hearts of the people of Israel. They believed that they were safe because God is dwelling in Zion. This faith gave further incentive to the pilgrims. They came to see God, to experience His loving presence and protection. Their faith, praises and prayers took the form of Psalms. These are the canticle of Zion.

Besides these Zion canticles, there are fifteen Psalms called Song of Ascents (Ps. 120 – 134). They also profess Jerusalem as the city of God and the Temple as the house of God. There were fifteen steps from the court of women to the court of Israel. The Levites sing each Psalm on each step and that is why they were called hymn of ascents. The Pilgrims also used to sing them while they climb the Mount Zion.

All these Psalms explain the aim and importance of the pilgrimage. “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come?” (Ps 121,1). “Those who trust in the LORD are like



Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever” (Ps 125, 1). People went to Jerusalem, Zion, with great longing to experience the presence of God. However, it is important to remember that it is only a symbol.

The really important factor is neither the city nor the Temple but the presence of God and the protection given by God. The prophets constantly reminded the people that the presence of God cannot be limited to a place. Pilgrimage should be conducted not to the top of the mountain but to the depth of one’s heart. The people, who were not ready to believe this, learned this truth, when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem in 587 B.C. The people came back from the Exile in Babylon and re-built the Temple in 515 B.C. Later Herod the Great started rebuilding and expanding the temple and this work was going on even during Jesus’ time. Finally the construction works were completed in AD 64, and just six years later the Roman army under Titus destroyed it in A.D. 70.

Today those who go to Jerusalem looking for the Temple will see only a small part of the retaining wall Herod built to expand the territory of the Temple. It is called the Western Wall or the “Wailing Wall”. The Jewish devotees shed tears in front of this wall recalling the tragedy that happened to Israel. The truth is that God does not dwell in a house built by human hands. The creator of heaven and the universe cannot be contained in any building. The prophets repeatedly warned the people that if they did not end their wicked ways and live according to the laws of the Covenant, God would destroy the Temple (Amos 9,1-6; Micah 3,12; Jer 7,1-14; 21,10; 26,4-6; Is 66, 1-3).

The same message was repeated by Jesus (Jn 2, 19-21). The goal of pilgrimage is not the Temple but God who is beyond the building made of stone. The invisible God became visible in Jesus Christ, “Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn

1,14). Hence the body of Christ is the true house of God. At the same time the Church, the community of the faithful that believe in Christ is considered as the body of Christ. Above all, the Bible leads us to believe that the heart of each person who believes in Jesus is a “house of God”. Hence, our pilgrimage should not be to an external place but into the depths of our hearts where God dwells.

This does not mean that there is no relevance for holy places and churches. What we need to search is Jesus, the God incarnate, who died and rose from the dead and still lives in our midst. Let us not forget the promise Jesus made: “I will be with you till the end of Times” (Mt 28,20). If we do not see God in our hearts, searching for Him outside will be meaningless. We must be able to see the face of God in all the people, especially those who are suffering and in need. Unless this happens, pilgrim centers and beautiful churches will be only show pieces and pilgrimages will end up as pleasure trips, which may ***God forbid!***

## 7.

### **Many will Rejoice**

*“The angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth” (Lk 1, 13-14).*

The Gospel of Luke has been called the Gospel of Joy because it is Luke who has written more about joy and being joyful than the other three Gospels. From the beginning to the end we can see an echo of joy in that Gospel. It began with a message of comfort to Zachariah who was frightened at the vision of the Angel. The Gospel ends depicting the joy of the disciples. “They returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God” (Lk 24, 52-53). Between these two episodes, the Evangelist deals with the message of joy and consolation many times.

Luke starts his gospel with the message of the angel: “Do not be afraid”. In the original Greek just as in English, “Zechariah” is the second word. Zechariah and his wife had longed for a child and prayed for the same for a long time. This elderly couple was considered as barren and their longing for a child was intense, but the sudden vision of the Angel, while he

was offering incense, frightened Zechariah. As a rule, people get scared in the presence of God and so the Angel started his message with the word of encouragement that banishes his fear.

The Angel gave him a message that will be a source of joy, not for the small family but for the entire world. God has heard their prayer. They were going to have a child, a hope they had almost abandoned as they advanced in ages. This gratuitous gift of God would give them great joy and happiness. That which they considered as impossible was made possible by God. Zechariah must know and believe that there is nothing impossible for God.

The child they were going to have would mark a turning point in the History of Salvation. His birth would give great joy not only to his parents but to all the people who were awaiting salvation. The name suggested for him points to this great joy. The name Johanan (John) is a combination of two Hebrew words – Yahweh + Hanan. God revealed the name Yahweh to Moses when He first appeared to him in the burning bush (Ex 3, 15). “Jo” is abbreviation of “Yahweh”. The same thing happened in the name Joshua. The word Hanan means grace. The child to be born will be a visible sign of the Grace of God, of His mercy and he will be an instrument in the hands of God and that will be the source of joy to the world.

The people of Israel had been waiting for the coming of the Messiah. This hope was fired up by the numerous promises God communicated through the prophets. It started in Genesis, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen 3, 15). Next came the promise given to Abraham (Gen 12, 1-3) and it was followed by numerous promises of a Messiah. Nathan prophesied that the Savior that was mentioned in the blessing to Jacob (Gen 49,10)

and the vision of Balaam (Num 24, 7-17) will be born as the son of David. This hope of the coming of the Messiah was kept alive through other prophesies such as 2 Sam 7, 8-17; Is 7, 14. 9,6-7. 11, 1-2; Jer 31, 31-34; Amos 9,11; Micah 5,21; Zachariah 9, and many more.. Prophet Malachi proclaimed that a prophet will be sent to prepare the way for the Messiah, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse” (Mal 4, 5-6).

The message the Angel gave to Zechariah was that the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophesies would begin with the child going to be born for him in his wife Elizabeth. That child will prepare the hearts of the people through reconciliation with God and with each other so that they will be able to accept the Savior. Humanity has reached the threshold of Salvation that was only an expectation until now.

Joy and gladness were two words emphasized in the message of the Angel. The first word in the Greek is “Chara” that is translated as joy. This joy is the result of receiving God’s grace, Charis in Greek, to which the word Chara is related, a state of joy one experiences when receiving the blessing of God. This word refers to the internal peace and joy one experiences in the presence of God.

The second word, “gladness” is the translation of the Greek word: “*Agalliasis*”. This word gives emphasis to the feeling of happiness one experiences when something good happens in their lives. The pleasant feeling they experience will be expressed in their attitudes, life style, relationship with others and in all their activities and life. One who is filled with gladness cannot remain gloomy as the joy will be visible on one’s face.

The source of this joy is not John but the Savior for whom he will prepare the way. Hence, the birth of John is also a source of joy. To imbibe this joy one has to believe the message given by the Angel. Zechariah could not believe the words of the Angel and he asked for a sign. He got the sign and that was the loss of his capacity to speak until all that was communicated took place; then he was able to speak and that became a source of joy and wonder for all (Lk 1, 64-66).

If the birth of the one, who came to prepare the way, should become a source of joy, one must not only believe in his words but also live according to his instructions. His words called for reconciliation between man and God and the people among themselves. “He will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Lk 1,16-17). Reconciliation must start at home and extend to the society, to all the people regardless of caste, creed, and sex. Then all will be happy. That is the message God gives through the Angel Gabriel.

## 8.

### Rejoice Highly Favored!

*“The Angel came to her and said, “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” (Lk 1, 28).*

The Evangelist Luke has marked the moment of the History of Salvation entering the state of fulfillment with the salutation quoted above. Mary was a simple village girl who was betrothed to Joseph, a young man from Nazareth. He worked as a Carpenter to make a living. As she was preparing to get married, the Angel appeared with an unusual greeting and communicating a message of great joy for the world.

Luke wrote the Gospel in Greek and the words used by the Angel for greetings deserves special attention. The Greek original was *“ChaireKecharitbomene”* which could be literally translated as “Rejoice you who are filled with grace”. The reason for rejoicing is the grace of God. The first word is a call to rejoice. This was a normal form of greeting used in the Greek language. Even today people use this greeting: *Chaire*. However, one should not fail to pay attention to the importance of the message. The Angel was bringing a message of great joy and gladness. It is this greeting that the Catholics are using during the Passover time “Queen of heaven, Rejoice, Halleluiah”.

After inviting Mary to rejoice, she was told that she was filled with God's grace and that was an explanation of the invitation to rejoice. "*ChaireKecharithomene*" is presented as an attribute of Mary. It came from the verb "*Charitoo*" which means confer grace, endow with grace. In the passive voice it could mean, "One who is subjected to grace" or "One who received or chosen to receive special grace". This introduction points to a special mission that is going to be entrusted to Mary. The next phrase shows that Grace was given her in order to carry on that mission.

"The Lord is with you" is more than a salutation; it is the confirmation of a truth. This is a common usage in the Bible. Before entrusting a special mission to a person, this promise is repeated. God assured of His presence with Isaac (Gen 26,24); Jacob (Gen 28, 15); Joseph (Gen 39, 21); Moses and Joshua (Josh 1, 3. 9). When Jeremiah was called to stand alone against the nation, God emphasized His presence with him, "Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD" (Jer 1, 8). Repeating this promise at the end of the call, God assured Jeremiah of His protection, "They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you" (Jer 1,19).

The presence of the Lord with the one called is a promise that will never change. Though the mission entrusted will be difficult, God will remain with the person at all times. The mission going to be entrusted to Mary would give great joy not only to her but to the whole world as it will mark the fulfillment of the salvation of humanity.

Upon hearing the greeting, Mary became disturbed and the Angel assured her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; ... and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there



will be no end” (Lk 1, 30-33). Son of God is going to become a human being; He will be the Savior of humanity. The name Jesus is a combination of two words, Yahweh + Shua = God saves. It is abbreviated into Jeshua or Joshua which, when translated into Greek became Jesus. It is the same in Latin as well as in English.

Mary realized that she was called to become the mother of the Son of God, the Savior of humanity. She was given the special grace to become the mother of God. The Angel has come to convey this good news and to ask her consent. When she was given the explanation she needed, Mary answered: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her” (Lk 1, 38). Her consent marked the first step for the birth of the Savior.

Though it was the special grace Mary received, similar grace is available to all. In the dream God revealed to Joseph, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel” (which means, God with us)” (Mt 1, 23). The source of Mary’s joy is that God is with her and through Joseph God is giving the same message to all who believe. When a woman praised Mary for becoming the mother of Jesus, he responded, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Lk 11, 28). The teaching, that all those who live according to the Word of God are like the mother and the brethren of Jesus (Lk 8, 21), points in the same direction. Grace of God is a gratuitous gift and all that we have to do is accept it with open heart and then we too will be able to hear the word of God in our hearts as Mary did.

God is with us in our joy and success as well as in our sorrows and failures. When we feel weighed down by the burdens of life, when we see only darkness ahead, when we feel fed up with life, when we are sinking and suffocating in despair we must listen to the voice of God deep in our hearts that whispers, “Rejoice, I am with you”.

## 9.

### Rejoice in the Lord

*“Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior’ (Lk 1, 47).*

Mary’s situation was not at all pleasant as she was about to encounter a terrible ordeal. Her marriage with Joseph the Carpenter from Nazareth was fixed. Without his knowledge she became pregnant. Who would believe that she became pregnant by the intervention of God? If Joseph rejects her what awaited her was the punishment to be stoned to death according to the Law of Moses (Deut 22, 13-21). The fact that soon after receiving the message from the Angel, she travelled to AinKarim, about 130 KM from her home, could be taken as a proof against her. Not only her reputation but her very life was at risk.

However, Mary was not afraid because she believed that it was God who called her to become the mother of His son and she was content with the response of the Angel that there was nothing impossible for God. Her deep faith was revealed in her response to the Angel, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1, 38). It shows submission to the will of God and total trust in His protection.

Faith, obedience and consecration were the source of happiness for Mary. She surrendered herself into the hands of the one who called her. From now on it will be God, whom she called her Lord, who fixes her goals and leads her on His path. No more she had her own plans and expectations. This faith and surrender gave her a great sense of security and unlimited joy. Hereafter she had only one goal in her life and that was to fulfill the will of God for her.

The joy and song of praise by Elizabeth, Mary's relative, created great joy in her heart and it came out as a song of praise, "Magnificat", "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away. He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever" (Lk 1, 46-55). This is a song of praise that is most used from the Bible.

The Magnificat is divided into two parts after the introductory verse (Lk 1, 46-47). The first part (1, 48-49) deals with Mary's personal experience. The second part (1, 50-55) deals with God's activities in the Salvation History. Magnifying God does not mean that we add something that is not true and express them as exaggerated events. Though the word "Magnify" has a connotation of showing off something as much larger than it really is, in this song it is not exaggerating but proclaiming the real greatness of God, confessing the glory of God that has been manifested through His actions. By recounting the strength, protection and mercy, we praise God and confess who God is for us.

Mary who offered herself to God is filled with the presence of God in her thoughts and feelings and that is the cause of her joy, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior". She has such a personal relationship with God to consider Him as her own and

that is what fills her heart with joy. Being the handmaid of God and fully belonging to Him is the source of her happiness.

The position of being lowly fills her not with inferiority complex but with trust in the Lord and an attitude that confesses that everything comes from God. She was aware of the great things God has done in her, through her. The great and happy news is that God is sending His only Son as the Savior of the world. The Incarnation of God as man! As a proof of her being an instrument in the Salvation event of humanity, Elizabeth and the baby in her womb were filled with the Holy Spirit by her presence and it came out as a song of praise from Elizabeth.

Mary proclaimed that the joy and God experience she received was available to all the people. She saw the works of God in all the events as she viewed the history through faith. All the poor and neglected became satisfied as they experienced the mercy and grace of God, but the rich and arrogant were neglected and rejected. God's work turns upside down the human approach and standards. All these became a reality through Jesus but its beginning could be seen in the Magnificat of Mary.

When we become aware of the fact that the Lord is the Savior, goal, source and life, fear will give way to joy. There will be no more anxiety or worries about anything. That is the lesson given by the Magnificat of Mary. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior".

## 10.

### Good News of Great Joy

*“Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger” (Lk 2, 10-12).*

A totally unexpected thing happened that night. There was a group of shepherds, outside the city of Bethlehem, watching over their sheep. It was so cold that a blanket could not keep them warm and so they started a fire and sat around it. Since thieves and wild animals could attack the sheep, they were vigilant. They were totally committed to their responsibility.

During the time of Jesus, the shepherds were at the bottom of the social scale. They were pushed aside as they were considered unclean. The high class people conveniently forgot that their ancestors were shepherds. The patriarchs of Israel, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were shepherds. Moses who liberated Israel from the slavery in Egypt was a shepherd. Above all, the most acclaimed King of Israel, David, was a shepherd. Disregarding those historical facts, the shepherds were considered as low class people as well as unclean and so pushed to the margins.

There were many laws and customs that divided people as clean and unclean. The main reasons were the origin, physical condition and occupation. The Gentiles and women were unclean by birth. Illness such as physical deformity, haemorrhage and Leprosy would make people unclean. There were two conditions to determine whether an occupation is clean or unclean. Any kind of job that prepares the way for stealing or touching another's body would make one unclean.

From this point of view the shepherds were considered as unclean because there was a possibility that someone could steal the sheep. Besides they were in close contact with the sheep and so they had the smell of the sheep that would make them unclean. Though all liked mutton, the people who tend the sheep were considered as unclean. What happened at mid-night that day was a public proclamation that God does not approve of such discriminations. "In that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night....And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2, 8-11).

God chose those who lived in the periphery of the society to hear about the birth of the Savior who was born in a cattle shed because his parents were poor and so not allowed to have a room in the Inn. The fact that God chose to have His son born in a manger showed His preferential option for the poor. He could have easily selected some comfortable place such as a palace or a rich man's house to have His Son born. From the beginning of His life, Jesus chose to be identified with the poor. A continuation of that was revealed in proclaiming the news first to the poor shepherds in the field.

The shepherds in the field had a great vision. "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone

around them” (Lk 2, 9). They saw light at midnight. It has a lot of symbolic connotations. The cold, dark night around them symbolized the life of the shepherds as well as the situation of the world. Into the midst of darkness, an angel came shedding light on them, removing the darkness. Naturally the shepherds were scared but soon their fear gave way to joy as the Angel gave them a message of great joy.

One has to observe each word of the angel closely. First of all their fear was eliminated by saying not to be afraid. The Angel continued, “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2,10-11). The Angel, the messenger from God, started saying that he was going to give them good news. The Greek word is “Evangelizo”. The next words reveal the nature of the Good News. He was bringing news of great joy; the original word used in Greek is “*Charan Megalen*”. This joy is for all the peoples in the world. The most important part of the message is, “I bring you”. The people who were neglected and pushed to the periphery were taken by God as the first ones to receive the good news of joy that is meant for the whole world.

One should not fail to notice the fact that the ways of God are different from that of the people and His choices do not follow the pattern set by human traditions. He takes note of the people neglected by the society and communicates His love and care for them by giving the good news to them first. The Angel explained the nature of the good News. “For to **you**, is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”. The prophets had proclaimed that the Savior will be born in the house of David. Prophet Micah had said that it will happen in Bethlehem. “O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come

forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days” (Mic 5, 2). The Good News the Angel communicated was that all those prophesies have been fulfilled. The Angel emphasized that a Savior was born for **you**. In this short message the Angel repeated twice the words “to you and for you” and that expressed the special consideration given to the shepherds who represented the people considered as unclean and down trodden.

The sign given to them deserves special attention. “This will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger” (Lk 2, 12). The signs were that of the poor, swaddling clothes and manger. The fact that the Son of God was born outside the city, in the middle of the night, in a cattle shed, as the poorest of the poor, was not an accident but a visible sign of the decision and choice of God. In the cave where the animals were kept, the only clean and warm place is the manger where the straw is kept. To protect the child from the freezing cold not only the pieces of clothes but also the straw would help.

Anyone could come into the cattle shed. It shows that God is available to all. The poor and outcasts could come to Him without hesitation. Even the rich could walk in there but they would have to bend down to enter the cave and understand the simplicity and poverty of the manger. It also shows that God rejected the rich man’s position and comforts. It is a Good News only to those who could understand and accept it.

Following the message there appeared an army of angels who sang praises to God: “Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!” (Lk 2, 13-14). The shepherds realized that they were given special consideration and blessing from God.



God's vision goes beyond the human view and attitude. The shepherds were filled with joy and immediately set out in search of the Savior born in the manger.

“They went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger” (Lk 2,16). As the Angel said, they saw the baby as one of them. The Savior was born outside the city, as a poor man. First they saw Mary and Joseph and with them the baby. There started the process of going to Jesus through Mary. Not only Mary and Joseph but all the saints show us the way to Jesus. We must not forget the message given by the manger and swaddling clothes as they stood for simplicity and utter poverty. We see the presence of God in simplicity. The source of joy is that God has become one of us. This news of great joy for all the people in the world is proclaimed since that day. This is what we celebrate every year during Christmas time.

It would be useful to take a look at the Christmas celebrations today. The wise men who came seeing the star got lost when they entered Judea. Naturally they went to the Palace seeking the Savior. Does the same happen to us today when we make cribs that look like palaces? What is the meaning of crib competition and giving prizes to the most beautiful cribs? Those who engage in such competitions seem to forget the poor, born outside the city and in the way side as Jesus did.

Where do we find Jesus? How should we interpret the message of the Angel? Where should we search for the Baby Jesus today? May be we should turn to the periphery of Bethlehem, among the poor and rejected. Then only we could hear the message of great joy: “A Savior is born for you”. That is the Good News.

## 11.

### Path to Happiness

*“The star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (Mt 2, 9-10).*

They started the long journey with great hope and anxiety. They were the wise men who came from East to see child Jesus. It is an episode recorded only in the Gospel of Mathew. The Evangelist does not say who they were or how many came. Later it was the curiosity of the faithful that depicted them as three kings from the East and they added their names as Melchior, Casper and Balthazar. There is a tradition that claims that centuries later their remains were found in Palestine and someone brought them to Germany and preserved in the Cathedral in Colón. If examined carefully, one can see that none of these is the message the Evangelist wants to communicate through this episode

The awareness that the Savior of the world has been born as the king of the Jews prompted those wise men to set out on such a difficult, long and risky journey. They had grown up in a tradition that believed that to save the world from the dominion of sin, a Messiah would come and He will be born in the land of the Jews as their king. They were astronomers and recognized the star that

appeared in the sky as the sign that the Savior has been born. To see the Savior in person and to pay him homage, they started the journey. The star guided them to the land of Judea

Among the ancient people, there was a belief that when someone with great importance is born a special star will appear in the sky. The basis of this assumption might be the shooting stars that appear and disappear in the sky. The scientific world has not come to a conclusion regarding the star that appeared in the sky when Jesus was born. However, the Evangelist was not so concerned about the time and nature of that star.

What the Evangelist wanted to communicate was that the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world was not an accidental event but something planned and decided by God and it was proclaimed by many of the prophets over the centuries. Mathew the evangelist has taken special interest to prove that the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus happened as the fulfillment of prophecies and as planned by God from time eternity. Such a prophecy is seen as fulfilled here: "The oracle of Balaam the son of Be or, ... I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh: a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab, and break down all the sons of Sheath" (Num 24, 15-17). Balaam was not a prophet of Israel but a gentile visionary. Balak, the king of Moab had brought him from far to curse Israel so that he could defeat them. But, Balaam could not curse Israel. On the other hand he pronounced a beautiful future for Israel. That prophecy was fulfilled through the visit of wise men recorded in the Gospel of Mathew.

Those who saw the Star and came in search of the Savior were gentiles and that goes along with the main theme of the Gospel of Mathew. Jesus Christ is the Savior whom the Jews rejected but the Gentiles accepted. In the beginning of the

Gospel, Mathew has stated that Jesus Christ is the Son of Abraham, and Son of David. Abraham was promised that through his offspring all the nations of the world will be blessed, pointing to universal salvation (Gen 22,18) whereas David was promised that his rule will last forever and a son of his will be always on the throne (2Sam 7,8-16). By presenting the gospel as: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Mt 1,1) the Evangelist is saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the prophecies.

The wise men who came in search of the King of the Jews got lost either because the Star disappeared or they failed to follow the Star. Thinking that they should search for the prince in the palace of the king, they came to Jerusalem. The visit of the wise men from the East and their search provided an opportunity to emphasize the fact that Jesus who was born in the manger was the king of the Jews. The wise men asked, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him”. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all of Jerusalem with him” (Mt 2,2-3). The people of Israel had been waiting for the birth of the king, the Messiah, but when it happened why did they become troubled?

The word troubled does not show the full impact of the word used in the original text in Greek, “*Ethrakthe*”. The NRSV translates it as frightened, which is closer to the original sense. This word expresses a feeling of being shocked with fear, terrified. The king became scared because he felt the birth of that child was a threat to his kingdom and to his existence. Hence he decided to find the child and kill it. The Religious leaders, with the help of Micah 5, 2, noted that the Messiah was to be born in the city of David, Bethlehem. Hiding his real intention, he told the visitors to come back after finding the child.

When they got out of the palace, they saw the Star again. It moved ahead of them and stopped above the place where the child Jesus was. “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (Mt 2, 11). The Star that showed them the way was lost for a while but when it appeared again, they were happy. They felt that their journey was not in vain, as they saw the King and Savior, Jesus and professed His Divinity, Kingship and Humanity by offering frankincense, gold and Myrrh. Frankincense is used for worshipping God; Gold is a royal metal and Myrrh is used to anoint the dead body.

By saying that they saw the child with his mother Mary, the Evangelist marked the beginning of the faith journey, “Through Mary to Jesus”. Mathew presented it as an acceptable truth. At the same time we have to remember that the final goal of the journey was not Mary but Jesus, and it is not Mary but Jesus alone that was worshiped.

Their journey was fruitful. They found that which they searched for and they prepared to return to their native places. They did not go back to the palace of Herod to give him the details of their search. Through a vision, the Angel revealed to them that returning to the palace of Herod was not only useless but also dangerous and so, “Being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way” (Mt 2,12). The Evangelist does not say after that what happened to them or what they did. Such details were created by some traditions in the Church much later.

They returned to their own country through “Another Way”. What is this “another way”? At first it would give the impression that they avoided the palace but there is a deeper

meaning to it. They took great risks and troubles to find the Savior and that journey was fruitful as they found the child king and paid him homage. That encounter might have created radical changes in their lives, attitude and life style.

Anyone who searches for the Savior without prejudice and with an open heart would find Him. For that, first one has to get out of the cages of false security and follow the Star that is the Word of God, like the Wise Men who came from the East and like Abraham who walked out of Haran. It will be a difficult journey. If the eyes get stuck in the king's palace, the Star would disappear and one would get lost. Return and continue in the dim light God provides. As Cardinal Newman who composed the song, "Lead Kindly Light" we would find the Savior. "Meantime, along the narrow rugged path, thyself hast trod, Lead Savior, lead me home in childlike faith, Home to my God. To rest forever after earthly strife, in the calm light of everlasting life!" (*From the poem "Lead Kindly Light by Cardinal Newman*).

That encounter would make one's life fruitful by creating radical changes in the life. As it happened to Saul who set out to wipe out Christianity from the face of the earth, was changed through the encounter with Jesus and he came to the conclusion that, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2,20). There will be no sense of loss but the conviction that Life has become meaningful. In total joy and satisfaction, Paul said: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Phil 1, 21-23). This is the end result of encountering God and that is what is hinted by "They departed to their own country by another way".

As they reached home, they might not have remained silent. They shared with others what they saw, heard and came to know. They would communicate with others through words and deeds and by their very lives. The joy they felt in their hearts would overflow to all they came in contact with. That is the real Evangelization. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full” (Jn 15, 11). The wise men who followed the Star made a long and risky journey to Bethlehem to see Jesus and they came to the realization that such a journey that gave them a deep spiritual awakening was not a loss.

That Star that guided the wise men is still available to those who dare to believe. If one closes one’s physical eyes and open the inner eye, one could see the light kindled by the Word of God deep in the heart. Follow that star in order to be filled with joy that could be shared with others. For that, may the heroic journey of the wise men be a model. May they be guided by the Word of God!

## 12.

### Joy in Retreating

*“John answered, “No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn 3, 27-30).*

He was the owner of an unusual personality! That was evident in his birth, life and death. His place is at the turning point of Salvation History, at the point when the Old Testament gives way to the New Testament. He stands out as the epitome of the Old Testament prophets as he pointed to the fulfillment of all the prophecies. His parents were aged and barren. Though they prayed and longed to have a son, when the news that a son was going to be born for them, Zechariah could not believe it. As if to say that one who cannot believe should not speak, he was given a sign – silence until all that the Angel had communicated took place.

There was something special about the name also. According to the custom in the land, the people wanted to give him his Father’s name Zechariah which meant that “God



remembered". But during the vision the Angel had told Zechariah to give the child the name "John" and so the mother insisted on giving him that name (Lk 1, 5-25). The name "John" meant "The grace of God", the sum total of all the blessings of God. This child was entrusted with the mission of preparing the way for the Messiah, God incarnate, who would save the world from the dominion of sin and open the door of heaven for humanity by accomplishing reconciliation between and God and the sinful man.

As the child was named, the message given by the Angel was completed. Zechariah regained the capacity to speak and he sang a beautiful hymn of praise (Lk 1, 67-79). The song praises not his son but the Savior whom Zechariah sees with a prophetic eye. This child is going to be the forerunner of the Savior, the dawn from on high "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins" (Lk 1, 76-77). That was the mission entrusted to him before his birth and at the time of his naming.

John had deep awareness not only about his mission but also about his life and God's plan for him. He prepared himself for his mission through an ascetic life in the wilderness for a long time. "The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel" (Lk 1, 80). John followed a severe life style, eating only Locusts and wild honey and wearing a woollen garment as that of a prophet. After spending his childhood and youth full years in the wilderness, at the appointed time he came to the bank of River Jordan. As if he was the manifestation of all the prophets of the old, his prophetic voice resounded in the wilderness and on the banks of Jordan. He challenged the unjust and hypocritical leadership, both political and religious. He called the people

to lead a life according to the precepts of the Covenant. The people thought Prophet Elijah has come back.

He prepared the way for the Messiah. “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”. For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”. John wore a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. They went out to him from Jerusalem and all of Judea as well as all the regions about the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire’. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Mt 3, 1-12).

The people and their leaders began to think that John was the awaited Messiah but John had a clear awareness of his personality and mission. John said in no uncertain terms that he was not the Messiah but his mission was to prepare the way for Him who comes behind him. He was like a messenger who announces the coming of the king. “The Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”...” I am

the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said".... Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" ... The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me'" (Jn 1, 19-30).

John was the voice resounding in the Jordan area to call the people for conversion, to prepare the way in the hearts, to renew their lives and to live according to the conditions of the Covenant. That was the only identity John claimed for himself. At the same time, he was determined to fulfill that mission perfectly, accepting all the challenges and dangers it involved. He proved this through his words and deeds and above all by his death. Until he completed his mission, John did not deviate from the way God had designed for him.

John could not believe that the man who stood in front of him to be baptized like all the other sinners was the Messiah. He saw the one for whom he was sent to prepare the way! He stood there like one of the people, like a sinner, to receive the baptism of repentance! One without sin, Son of God who came to offer himself as a holocaust for the sins of the world, to reconcile the humanity to God, to save the world from the dominion of sin and to open the door of heaven for the humanity. John could not understand the meaning of his action but he accepted his explanation and acted accordingly. "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 thus it is fitting

for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented" (Mt 3, 14-15) and saw what happened! As the creator bend his head before the creature, the heaven opened, the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove and God the Father announced, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3, 17).

John decided to send the disciples who followed him to follow Jesus. Pointing to Jesus, he told his disciples, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1, 29. 36). John was only happy to relinquish his disciples for Jesus. But, many of his disciples, seeing him as the Eschatological prophet, Elijah and the Messiah could not understand or accept this attitude of resignation on the part of their master.

When Jesus and His disciples began to baptize people, not far from the place where John was baptizing, his disciples were upset and angry. They felt that they were being pushed aside. They became very jealous when they saw that the man from Nazareth who received baptism from their master was becoming more popular. They could not accept it and so they complained to John, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, here he is, baptizing, and all are going to him" (Jn 3, 26). Their feelings were hurt. The one who came behind seems to have become more important.

However, John the Baptist was not worried. He was only happy that his mission was completed. John explained that there is only one bride and one bridegroom. The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The tradition of depicting God as bridegroom and the people of God as the bride, started during the time of Hosea. The prophets, who came after him, used that metaphor freely. It was the poetic presentation of this usage that portrayed Jesus as the bridegroom and the Church as the bride as in the book of Revelation (19, 7-9; 21, 2). In this situation John made clear his position. He was not the Messiah

but only the one sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. John was happy and content to see that Jesus has started his mission and the people have become ready to accept Him.

Hence John's joy was complete and he said, "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3, 29-30). John's attitude was that Jesus deserved all the followers and popularity. Jesus must grow while John withdrew into the background. Salvation would come to humanity only through Jesus. By vacating the stage for Jesus, John has given a great example and direction for the future generation. There was only one thing left for John to do and that was sacrificing his life. He who prepared the way for Jesus through his words and deeds saw that his death also was part of the mission entrusted to him.

John challenged the king Herod Antipas for breaking the law of God and asked him to repent. He accused him of adultery for marrying his brother's wife and urged him to return his wife Herodias to her lawful husband. This led to his end. Herodias celebrated the king's birthday and her victory over the one who rebuked her, by beheading John who was in prison (Mt 14, 3-10). John happily surrendered his life. What happened to John was a symbol and warning of what was going to happen to Jesus.

After completing the mission entrusted to him, John withdrew into the background, leaving a model for all at all times. God has a plan for each one and when that is completed, to the best of one's ability, one must retire or step aside with joy and satisfaction, for the future generation. It is important that we become aware of our limitations and surrender to the will of God. "The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;

I have a goodly heritage” (Ps 16, 5-6). John the Baptist had the mentality of the Psalmist and with joy fulfilled his mission and then left the stage with a sense of satisfaction of having completed the plan of God for him. Each one must find joy in completing the mission entrusted and also to retire, handing over the mission to the successor

Jealousy would not lead us to happiness. The experience of the disciples of John could happen to anyone. It is possible to feel that others are growing and becoming famous while one is being neglected. This line of thinking will do no good to anybody. It is possible to have the feeling of discontent and jealousy on all levels such as personal, political, religious and faith matters. Then there will be competition and power struggle that would lead to attempts to become more popular by pushing down others. This could lead to enmity and character assassination. In such situations the example and attitude of John the Baptist should be inspiring. What we need is being satisfied with what we do and then encourage and co-operate with others.

When the mission entrusted to us is completed entrust the responsibility to the successor and retire, giving encouragement and support to carry on the mission efficiently and effectively. Each person has certain limitations about which one needs to become aware of, to the point of being satisfied with whatever has been accomplished. Some people are hesitant to withdraw and even if they are forced to do so, they would continue to interfere with the work of the successor. Such people, instead of helping the followers would hinder their work. Just as Moses gave way to Joshua and John the Baptist gave way to Jesus, we must learn to withdraw with the attitude, “Now my joy is completed”.

## 13.

### **Good News, the Source of Happiness**

*“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the Good News” (Mk 1, 14-15).*

Mark, the disciple of Peter, called the book he was writing, “Good News”. Of the four Canonical Gospels, the first one was written by Mark. The main theme of the Gospel is not the biography of Jesus but the salvation attained through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Some scholars think that it was Mark who called the Gospel, “Good News”.

Though it is a familiar word today, the meaning and connotation of the word “Good News” is not that simple. Mark began the Gospel with these words, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1, 1). What is this “Good News”? Though he started saying “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ”, a little later he says: “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God” (Mk 1, 14). What did he mean by “good news of Jesus Christ”? By saying that Jesus proclaimed “The good news of God”, the author seems to say that what Jesus announced was the “good news”.

The usage “of” usually refers to ownership. For example, the book of Peter or the house of Mathew. However, in Greek there is another possibility for this phrase. It points not to the object owned but to the one who owns the object. Technically it is called *epexegetical genitive* (self-explanatory genitive), meaning that the conjunction is explaining the nature of the one to whom it is applied. From this point of view, the good news is not what Jesus proclaimed, but Jesus himself is the Good News

The Evangelist called the good news Jesus preached and revealed as “The Kingdom of God” and in the summary of the first sermon of Jesus, Mark recorded two statements and two incentives. By analyzing these four elements we could see how the Gospel becomes the source of happiness.

The first statement is “The time is fulfilled”. The whole humanity, especially the people of Israel had been anxiously waiting for the coming of the time of salvation. This “time” referred to “hope” that was rooted in the prophecies of the prophets regarding the coming of the Savior, the Messiah. The next statement describes the fulfillment of this expectation: “The Kingdom of God has come near”. What does it mean Kingdom has come near? The Greek word used here is *εγγιζει*. It can mean to approach, be near, but it can also denote the presence of something: behold it is here! It means that the Kingdom of God is here, at the threshold.

In the light of this reality, two things are demanded of the people: Repent and Believe. The Greek word here translated as repent is *Metanoieite*. But the word repent does not do full justice to the content of the Greek word. Repentance usually points to feeling sorry about the mistakes one made or sins committed. It is not enough that one admits that what one did was wrong and the person feels sorry about it; it is only the beginning. What is more important is to make a resolution not



to repeat it, or rather to change life. The call addressed to the people with the word *metanoete* demands a radical change in one's vision, aspirations, hopes and way of life. It is a real conversion, and repentance is only the beginning of this process.

To have such a conversion of mind, one needs faith, the kind of faith Abraham and the Blessed Mother had. Again good news has become an object of faith. We have to keep in mind that the Good News is both the person of Jesus as well as the content of his teaching. The entire message revealed and preached by Jesus could be summarized as the "Kingdom of God". The sum and substance of the Good News is that the Kingdom of God is in our midst. Here comes the question, what is the Kingdom of God? The Kingdom of God is not a geographical location but a state of being in which God's will is fulfilled in its totality.

In the Gospels we see two different forms of the Lord's Prayer: Mathew 6, 9-13 and Luke 11, 2-4. The version presented in Mathew is longer than that of Luke because, Bible Scholars think that Luke has avoided the repetition that is common in the Semitic language. If this opinion is accepted then we get a decisive explanation about the Kingdom of God. Luke has not recorded the phrase, "Let Thy will be done as it is in heaven" because it is an explanation and repetition of the request, "Thy Kingdom come".

The Kingdom of God is a state of being in which the will of God will be executed in every sense of that word. That is what is meant by the rule of God. Jesus proclaimed that the rule of God, that was only a hope until now, has started with his coming. He demonstrated the presence of the Kingdom of God or the beginning of the Rule of God on earth through many miracles he performed. That is the good news, the source of our joy. This could be clarified through an example from history.

Athens and Sparta were two powerful city states in Greece during the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Darius I, the emperor

of Persia, tried to conquer the whole of Greece and expand his empire, but Athens, the most important city state of Greece, not only resisted the Persians but even liberated Eritrea from the Persian control. This infuriated the Persian king. In retaliation, King Darius I decided to destroy both cities. Eretria was destroyed and the army moved against Athens. It was in the 450 BC.

*Athens realized that they were in real danger and that they will not be able to repulse the Persian army that was three times stronger than them. Hence Athens sought the help of Sparta. Philippides, a speed runner, ran the 240 K.M with the request for help. At the same time the Persian army encamped in the harbor city, Marathon, about 40 K.M away from Athens. Gathering all the forces they had, the Athenians prepared for defence in Marathon. On the fourth day Philippides returned with the disappointing news that Spartans could not come as they were having a celebration for a week.*

However, before Philippides returned, the Persian army attacked and Athenians resisted in their life and death battle. The Persian chariots got stuck in the mud. The Athenians surrounded them and killed them off. Philippides returned with the bad news but he was welcomed with the good news that Athens had won without foreign help. Again he ran to the Parliament of Athens and shouted **“Chairetenicomen”** which meant rejoice we have won the war. Announcing this he fell down dead. During the Olympic Games his memory is celebrated with the Marathon race.

Rejoice, we have won! The Persian army that set out to destroy us has been defeated and so the people of Greece can live in peace and that was the good news Philippides proclaimed. The good news Jesus proclaimed could be compared to this. Jesus has defeated Satan who had established authority over humanity and the rule of God has been established on earth and that is the good news Jesus proclaimed.

Mark used the word "*Evangelion*" which means "good news" as the title of the book he wrote. This word was influenced by the Old Testament also. This idea was presented by Deutero who proclaimed the good news of liberation to the people of Israel who lived as captives in Babylon. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns" (Is 52, 7-8).

The prophet depicts Jerusalem as the mother who laments over her children because they were taken as slaves to Babylon. This mother sees on the Mount of Olives the feet of the messenger who comes with the message of liberation of her children. The messenger proclaims the good news for which the word "*Bashar*" is used in Hebrew and "*Evangelion*" in Greek. The prophet summarizes the content of the good news in two words, "*Malak Eloheyka*" in Hebrew and it means "Your God rules".

The real king is not Babylon but God the Father. In the prophet's words God has defeated Babylon and established His rule. That is the message which brings joy to the bereaved mother, Jerusalem. In Jesus' words, the victory is won not against Babylon but against all the powers of evil, sin and death; ultimately against Satan, the embodiment of all that is evil in the world. God is the King! That is the good news, the source of true joy. This was the Good News Jesus proclaimed, and is still proclaiming.

## 14.

### Joy in Suffering

*“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets’ (Lk 6, 22-23).*

The invitation and promise of Jesus is totally surprising. This statement is found at the beginning of what is known as the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Mathew as well as at the beginning of the sermon in the plain in the gospel of Luke. It is generally agreed that in Matthew the sermon on the Mountain is presented as the policy statement of Jesus, proclaiming and explaining the nature of the Kingdom of God. This is the last one in the list of the Gospel blessings, usually called the Beatitudes. These words of Jesus, pointing to the real source of true joy and unending happiness, put human aspirations and value systems turned upside down. Hence these utterances deserve special attention.

This teaching of Jesus shows that truth is directly opposite to what is apparent. As a rule people consider health, wealth, fame, long life and high social status as the blessings of God. But the teaching of Jesus changed this value system. He

reminded that those who wish to follow Him must be aware of this truth. “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they malign those of his household?” (Mt 10, 24-25). This shows that the disciples of Jesus will be persecuted and killed. Their fate will not be any better than what Jesus would receive. What is the blessing in this and how can one find joy in this suffering?

Jesus Points out two things in relation to the source of joy:  
 1. The reason for the persecution; II. The source of their joy.

### ***I. The Reason for Persecution***

What is envisaged is not the punishment received for the wrong done. The reason for the persecution is “on account of the Son of Man”. This means that one believes and confesses that the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of God who became Man. Not only believes in the heart and proclaims with the lips, but also lives according to the precepts Jesus gave and follows the model he has shown. It also means to accept God as the Father and all the people as brothers and sisters, seeing the face of God in all the people and with the conviction that all have equal dignity and rights. Do not discriminate against any one on the basis of caste, color, creed, occupation or social status. God does not approve of such discriminations.

Not all the people would accept this teaching about God and human beings. Those who reject this teaching will oppose those who accept and live according to it. The reason for the opposition and persecution could be various. It could be the fear of financial loss or because of the religious belief they follow and the kind of convictions they have. Jesus has warned,

“Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God” (Jn 16, 2).

### **Jesus told his followers to expect four kinds of rejections:**

1. **Hatred:** The disciples of Christ would be not only rejected but they will be subjected to hatred and considered as enemies.
2. **Thrown out:** The Greek origin for this word is “apporiso” which means cast out of the boundary. Try to make them feel unwanted and alone in every way possible.
3. **Insult:** They will be laughed at just because they are the disciples of Christ. They might be subjected to false accusations and trials and all the kinds of atrocities could happen.
4. **Reject considering them to have a bad reputation:** It might be considered as a crime being a Christian. This prophecy was fulfilled during the time of Emperor Nero of Rome as he proclaimed “non licet christianos esse” which means it is a crime to be a Christian. This law made by Nero in 64 A.D. continued in Rome until it was declared “null and void” by Emperor Constantine in 313 through the “Edict of Milan”.

Hatred, insult, persecution and even death could happen just because one follows Jesus. But none of these should make the disciples unhappy but consider them as a source of joy and sign of salvation.

## ***II. The Source of Joy***

How could the cruel persecutions and intense suffering become a source of joy? It is not logical to say that suffering is the

source of happiness. But, Jesus has stated this beyond any shadow of doubt. Suffering in this world is short lived and it is only a preparation for eternal happiness in heaven. Those who accept the suffering in the name of Jesus will receive eternal reward. Jesus has said, “Your treasure will be great in heaven”. Being with God for eternity and participating in the happiness of God and being part of the heavenly body is the source of real joy. That is the promise Jesus gave and also the fundamental reason for joy.

The awareness of the eternal happiness would give one great joy. This is expressed by two words in Greek. The first is “*Chairete*”. It is generally translated as rejoice. This gives emphasis for the internal feeling of happiness. It also points out that the joy one feels inside would be expressed externally. That external expression of the inner joy is meant by another Greek word, namely, *skirtesate*. When one is filled with joy inside, one would jump up and down like little children and dance with joy. That is what is meant by the Greek word, “*Skirtao*”. The same word is used to express the joy of the unborn child in the womb of Elizabeth at the salutation of Mary, with the child Jesus in her womb. Upon hearing the sound of greetings from Mary, the baby in the womb of Elizabeth jumped with joy.

Jesus assured that suffering for being a believer in Him and the Gospel He proclaimed is the greatest gift one can get in this life. The Apostles, who considered it as a great treasure, did not fear anything or anybody. Nothing could turn them back from their faith. Singing Halleluiah, they walked into prison, scaffold and burning furnace.

The Apostles who were beaten by the order of the Sanhedrin did not fear or feel sad. On the contrary they rejoiced: “They ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the Name”

(Acts 5, 40-41). For the same reason, Paul considered it better to die and be with the Lord than live in this world because he loved Jesus so ardently. “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil 1, 21-23). When one is convinced of this all the worldly gain would be like nothing. “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3, 8).

While undergoing persecution, the Apostle told the Church in Philippi that accepting suffering in the name of Jesus Christ is a blessing. “He has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well” (Phil 1, 29). A true disciple of Christ should be ready to “Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 2,3), he wrote to Timothy. Peter told the faithful that suffering in the name of Jesus will be a source of joy. “In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith-- being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire-- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet 1, 6 – 7). When we have to accept suffering in the name of Christ, we must not become discouraged but, “Consider Him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart” (Heb 12,3).

The true source of joy and endless hope for a Christian, from the beginning of the Christianity to this day, is the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. This has been proven through the martyrdom of numerous saints. Some people persecute Christians and even try to wipe them out of the face of the



earth, convinced by wrong ideas, certain ideologies, financial policies and erroneous religious convictions. Their numbers are increasing and the Christians are persecuted with such brutality as is described in the book of Revelation.

However, the Christians who believe in Jesus and His Gospel do not fear because their faith is in Jesus Christ who defeated the satanic power that is hiding behind religious persecutors. Jesus is the one who said, “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets” (Lk 6, 23). This is not the opium that blunts the human intellect but deep faith and trust in Jesus Christ who rose from the dead. The peace and joy they experience in the midst of persecution is the shining proof of this faith.

## 15.

### Citizenship in Heaven

*“I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Lk 10, 18-20).*

The disciples returned with great joy after their first experience of evangelization and they narrated to the Master all that they experienced. They had set out with fear and reluctance but they came back with wonderful experiences as they could not believe the miracles that took place when they prayed and that made their first experience a great success. The evil spirits went out with great commotion. Their experiences convinced them that all that the Lord said is true.

Jesus shared their joy and at the same time called their attention to the fact the true source of joy was beyond the miracles they were able to perform. All the miracles of healing and exorcism were only signs. The source of their real happiness is that their names were written in heaven. What does it mean by that their names were written in heaven?

**Heaven:** Heaven is considered to be the place where God is. It was in this sense that Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer. Many of the phrases like came down from heaven; went up to heaven; Taken up to heaven; heaven opened etc. present heaven as the abiding place of God. But, it is difficult to find the answer to the question where this heaven is. If God is the creator and Omnipresent, He cannot be limited to a particular place.

If examined closely the words of Jesus and the account of heaven, one thing becomes clear: heaven is not a physical place but a state of being. Going one step further we could say that God is heaven. For example in the Gospel of Mathew, he calls the kingdom of God, "Kingdom of Heaven"

Because of the honor and respect the Jews had for God, they would not pronounce the name "Yahweh". When they see the word, they would read it "Adonai" which means "My Lord". In Hebrew language only the consonants were written, not vowels, and so "Yahweh" was written as "YHWH". Hence there was confusion regarding the 4 letters that referred to God's name. When the three consonants of the word "Adonai", A – O – A, is pronounced, it became Yahowah. However, bible scholars are convinced that this name should be pronounced as Yahweh. It is from this, "Lord" became the name of God.

The Jews, due to great respect and awe, are reluctant to pronounce even the word "God". Instead of God they would use the words such as "Almighty", "All powerful" or the "One in heaven". "Going to heaven" does not mean that one is going to a place but to God. Hence, the question where is heaven, is not relevant. "Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father" means He took back the Divine Glory He set aside while He became man.

St. Paul was saying the same when he said, "God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name"

(Phil 2,9). The Ascension of Jesus and Assumption of Mary do not refer to places but states of being. The Divine milieu is beyond time and place and so saying above, below, yesterday, today etc. have no relevance in the matter of God. Being in heaven means being in God.

**Write Your Name:** If God means Heaven, what does it mean by “Your name is written in heaven”? Here also a symbolic language is used. Writing the name signifies ownership which means the thing or place belong to the person whose name is written.

To point out that a person belongs to a certain city or country, the practice of registering the name is common. When a child is born the name has to be registered in the municipal office by which the child is accepted as the member of that city and country. Removing the name from the register would mean denying the citizenship.

It is in this sense that the book of Revelation talks about the ones whose names are not written in the “Book of Life”. “Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20, 15). Hence, writing one’s name in the book of life would mean getting membership in heaven, a state in which the will of God is executed in its perfection. Paul describes the Kingdom of God: “The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14,17).

By saying “Your name is written in heaven” Jesus was assuring the disciples that they were citizens of heaven or God has accepted them as His own children. What they experienced, the miracles were only signs of this great truth. We are not to get stuck with the signs but turn our attention to the reality that is pointed out by the sign.

Jesus explained that the meaning and goal of the miracles He performed was to reveal the presence of the Kingdom of God: “if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Lk 11,20). All the miracles Jesus performed should be seen as signs that reveal that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, source of Life and Light of the world. That is why John called the miracles performed by Jesus “signs”. Seven such signs are presented in the Gospel of John of which the first was changing the water into wine during the wedding at Cana and the seventh was raising Lazarus who was in the tomb for three days. Thus, he revealed that He is the Lord of life.

The real reason for the joy of the disciples is not the miracles they performed but the fact that the Kingdom of God has become a reality and they are citizens of that Kingdom. It is Jesus who accomplished the victory over the power of Satan. The disciples were called to participate in that victory. The miracles they performed were the proof of this participation in the victory of Jesus.

It would seem that to a certain extent the teaching of Jesus is forgotten. People seem to search for more and more miracles and signs as they have an undying thirst for miracles and go after places upon hearing some miracle happened. In the same way they seem to go on searching for people with some special gifts and visions. Unfortunately none of these would give lasting joy and satisfaction. That is why they continue searching for more and more places and people. Only the teaching of Jesus and living according to them would give lasting joy and inner peace. Jesus tells us to be happy because our names are written in heaven and we are citizens of heaven. Find joy in being the children of God and that is not just an emotional experience but a lasting conviction.

## 16.

### Joy of Jesus

*“At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will....For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it” (Lk 10, 21-24).*

Jesus chose 12 Apostles in the place of the 12 tribes of Israel and sent them for Evangelization (Lk 6, 12-16; 9, 1-6). Soon after they returned, Jesus sent 72 with the same message. These 72 reminds one, of the 72 elders Moses appointed during the journey through the wilderness as his helpers (Num 11, 16-30). The main mission of these Apostles and the 72 disciples was to prepare the way for Jesus (Lk 10, 1-12). They had a great experience and they came back with wonderful stories of miracles. The happiness of the disciples made Jesus happy. Then Jesus made certain revelations.

Luke is presenting more than the joy of success in the mission. “At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent

and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it” (Lk 10,21-24). The usage “same hour” points to the return of the disciples and their sharing. Before presenting Jesus’ reaction to the enthusiasm of the disciples the evangelist reports that Jesus taught them about the true reason of their joy. From the reaction of Jesus quoted above, five points need special attention:

### **1. Jesus Rejoiced:**

The Greek word is *“Agalliao”* It denotes deep internal happiness one experiences, a joy that becomes evident on one’s face and actions. In the beginning of Magnificat, such an outpouring of joy could be seen, “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Lk 1, 47). In the Sermon on the Mount, in the last beatitude, this word appears: “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt 5,11-12). In the Greek it is *“Kairete Kai agalliaste”* and that was translated as “rejoice and be glad”. The joy that filled the heart was expressed through loud singing of praises, leaping and dance. It was similar to the experience Elizabeth had. The babe in her womb leaped with joy hearing the greetings of Mary who was carrying Jesus in her womb. Such expression of exuberance was unusual for Jesus. Jesus was so happy to see that the disciples felt thrilled with the experience of Evangelization.

## **2.The Work of the Holy Spirit:**

Though Mathew also has presented the song of praise by Jesus, (Mt 11, 25-27) only Luke depicted the joy and the work of the Holy Spirit. Special care was taken by Luke to show that the Holy Spirit was active from the moment of conception to the Resurrection of Jesus. It was through the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Mary that the Incarnation of the Son of God took place (Lk 1, 35). At the end,when the Son of God handed over the Spirit to the Father (Lk 23, 46) that life came to an end. Luke took special care to note that the Holy Spirit was actively involved in all the works of Jesus. The “Anointing of the Spirit” at the time of Baptism (3,22); temptation in the wilderness (4,1) Beginning of Galilean ministry (4, 14) and the first episode in the Synagogue in Nazareth (4,18-22) are examples of the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ. It is the Holy Spirit that prompted Jesus to praise God when the disciples returned after fulfilling their mission. Jesus constantly remained open to the works of the Spirit in His life. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus spoke and it contained a great revelation.

## **3. The Revelation of the Holy Spirit:**

Filled with the Holy Spirit Jesus spoke and it revealed the Holy Trinity. It is the Holy Spirit that guides Jesus from within and inspires Him to speak. The center, the source and goal is God the Father. The Lord of heaven and earth is the Father, Father of Jesus. At the same time, Jesus who sang the “Song of Praise” is the Son of God. There is a special relationship between the Father and Son, a mystery only God knows. Jesus was giving an indication of this sublime mystery. God is the unity between Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The Apostles were given an insight into this mystery of unity between Father and Son and the Father was praised for the same.



#### **4. Good News to the Poor:**

The main theme of the song of praise is that the mystery of the Kingdom was revealed to the simple, humble people. “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants”. The people who were considered to be wise in the eyes of the world tried but failed to understand those mysteries but they were revealed to the disciples. This revelation was the reason for the joy of Jesus. When Paul talks about the failure of worldly wisdom, (1 Cor 1, 18-24), he was pointing to this truth.

The Divine mystery cannot be understood by the human intellect. They need to be revealed and the people chosen to receive that revelation were ignorant, simple and humble in the eyes of the world. The plan of God turns upside down the views of man. Jesus called his disciples “infants” in the song of praise. In the society they were considered as nothing, as they were simple, ordinary people. They did not have scholarly achievements of the Scribes or the high status of the Pharisees in the society or the authoritative position of the Sadducees.

This plan of God was constantly present in the teaching and activities of Jesus. This was evident not only in the programmatic statement at Nazareth, but all through His life. “To proclaim the Gospel to the poor.... (Lk 4, 18-21) and in the Sermon on the plain, “Blessed are you poor... (Lk6, 20). The Apostles received such a joyful experience through their activities of Evangelization.

#### **5. Eschatological Vision:**

The disciples came back and expressed the joy they felt in participating in the power of Jesus. He had given them power to perform miracles such as healing the sick and casting out

demons. But Jesus turned their attention to a greater reality as He said, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning" (Lk 10, 18). When the Apostles commanded in the name of Jesus, they saw wonders which were its visible sign of the fall of Satan.

With the coming of Jesus, the dominion of Satan comes to an end. The Kingdom of God defeated the Kingdom of Satan and what happened during the evangelization of the disciples, was the sign of the defeat of Satan. However these signs directed their attention to the Kingdom of God.

Until now the Kingdom of God was only a promise but with the coming of Jesus it has become a reality. The miracles performed by the disciples, the first rays of hope that God established his rule on earth, were the visible signs of the Kingdom of God (Lk 11, 20). It marked the end of the old age that was subjected to sin and death and the beginning of the new age that provides eternal life. Jesus was happy that the disciples were able to discern the work of God.

God the Father is the cause, source and goal of everything. Jesus "is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1,15), The Word who became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1,14) the Son of God, who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant", (Phil 2, 7). The love that flows from the Son into the Father and from the Father into the Son is the Holy Spirit. The disciples must know that they were chosen to receive the revelation of this Triune God. The Father revealed the mystery that was hidden to them until now. This revelation came from the Father, through the Son and the Holy Spirit. That should be the real source of their joy.

God the Father makes His rule operative on earth through the Son with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom of God came defeating the kingdom of Satan. The first sign of

it was the miracles performed by Jesus, by the Apostles and disciples in the name of Jesus. Since the Father has given this knowledge, they must rejoice. Jesus was happy to see that his mission was fulfilled on earth. We are not to get stuck in the signs but go beyond to the reality that is signified by those signs. Then we will realize that we too are included in the love of God, as the beloved children of God and as the heirs of the Kingdom of God. Let that be the source of our joy.

## 17.

### Joy of Liberation

*“There appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment”. When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day”. But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing” (Lk 13, 11-17).*

The Gospel passage under discussion presents some important facts about the joy presented in the Bible. The episode that starts with the introduction, “Jesus was teaching in the Synagogue” ends with the opponents feeling ashamed and the people feeling happy. In between there is the liberating action of Jesus, the joyful out-burst of the liberated woman; the scolding of the angry president of the Synagogue and the

response of Jesus. An analysis of this episode would help to understand the various sides of the joy the people experienced.

Only Luke has narrated this episode. What is under discussion is a miracle Jesus performed for a woman. Luke gives special consideration to women and presents them as equal to men. According to Luke it was the last visit of Jesus to a Synagogue. Before that Jesus had gone to the Synagogue many times and taught (Lk 4,16. 44; 6,6) but after this incident apparently Jesus did not visit another Synagogue. Jesus spoke to the people gathered in the houses, wayside and lake shore. The Evangelist does not say why Jesus did not go into the Synagogue but it is possible that the negative approach of the Synagogue authority might have influenced His decision.

The main character in this episode is a woman. RSV Bible says "There appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight". The original phrase in Greek used the word "*Pneuma*" which means spirit. This would imply that she was affected by a spirit that caused weakness in her body.

From the way it is presented, it is difficult to decide if it was an illness or a case of possession by an evil spirit. The Evangelist does not say that she was sick but pointed to the cause of her infirmity and then turned to her condition. The translation, "she was bent over and could not stand straight" does not do justice to the original version. In Greek the word used was "*eistoPanteles*" which means she was completely bent that she could not raise her head at all. More than an illness it refers to severe condition of slavery.

Her physical condition reflected her spiritual and social conditions. One who could not stand straight, totally bent down, is a symbol of the condition of women in the society during the time of Jesus. The women in Israel had no rights and

her condition was below the status of a Gentile slave. Being born as a woman was considered as a curse.

The woman was always under a man. Until marriage she was under her father and then under her husband and if the husband died she will be under the dominion of sons. She had no right to express her opinion or to speak in public. Her head should be covered all the time. Even at home she was not allowed to speak or pray aloud. In the Synagogue her place was in the back or outside the building. This situation has to be kept in mind while analyzing the actions of Jesus.

The first thing that comes to our attention is that Jesus noticed her, an old woman totally bent down, as she stood among the women, expecting and hoping for nothing and ignored by all. Jesus asked her to come forward and she came breaking the boundaries of women and stood near Jesus who extended His hand and blessed her, saying you are freed of your infirmity. Immediately she stood up straight and praised God aloud.

The two things she did point to a great liberation. First of all, Jesus called her and she came, thereby breaking the boundaries set for women. This was the first act of liberation that demolished man-made boundaries that separate individuals and categorize people as superior and inferior. Then she stood up and praised God. She forgot that she was not supposed to stand in the area set aside for Israel men and that she was not allowed to speak aloud in public. As she could not contain the joy of getting well, being able to stand straight, with a grateful heart she praised God in a loud voice. She forgot all the laws that bound her or enslaved her. Forgetting herself, with a grateful heart she praised God. Near Jesus, she felt totally free.

No law comes from God that enslaves people. God created man and woman in His own image and wanted them to remain free without discrimination and domination by

another. In Nazareth Jesus had proclaimed that He has come to free the oppressed and to release the captives. In this incident that proclamation was becoming a reality. Luke continued to present a conflict between him and the Synagogue authority. At the end the cause of joy becomes clear.

The Synagogue authority was not concerned with the freedom and healing received by the bent woman; he was concerned only about the observance of the law. Though it was Jesus who broke the law, with anger he scolded the people because he did not dare to confront Jesus. He said, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day".

Sabbath observance is the subject of conflict here. The Ten Commandments are listed twice in the Bible, in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, and there is a slight difference in the formulation of the commandment concerning the observance of Sabbath and the reason given to it. In the formulation in the Book of Exodus the emphasis is on not working on Sabbath: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it (Ex 20,8-11). People have to abstain from work in memory of the creation and rest of God.

But in the formulation of the book Deuteronomy emphasis is different: "Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your manservant, or your maidservant, or your ox,

or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Dt 5,12-15). Here the command is to rest. It guarantees the right for people who work to rest. Man should not be reduced to slavery of work. It is also important to note that in the formulation in Deuteronomy the reason for rest is the fact of liberation from the slavery in Egypt which God granted them.

It protects the right to rest for all those who are toiling. But the presentation in the book of Exodus forbids working on Sabbath. Now the question arises: what is work? What is the work that is permitted and what is forbidden? The lawyers had prepared a list of works that are forbidden and permitted on Sabbath. Healing was one of the forbidden works. A physician could provide treatment only in the case of life threatening situation and then only as far as it was necessary to preserve life. In this situation the anger and scolding of the Synagogue president is understandable. But, this explanation was not acceptable to Jesus.

The teaching of Jesus that Sabbath was made for man and that man was not made for Sabbath (Mk 2, 28) clearly points out the meaning and purpose of the law. The law of Sabbath was given not to make man slave but free him to do good. Jesus took up the criticism of Prophet Jeremiah, “The false pen of the scribes has made I (the law) into a lie?” (Jer 8, 8). Every word and action of Jesus reflected his stance, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Mt 5, 17). The real aim of Sabbath was to insure freedom and rest to all. Jesus opposed the Pharisees blocking this freedom of the individuals through their literal adherence to the law and proclaimed that holding on to the letter of the law, forgetting its original spirit, is hypocrisy.



The Evangelist gives emphasis to the authority of Jesus by presenting Jesus as The Lord., “The Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?” (Lk 13, 15). The word “Lord” is used to address “God”. By using that title Luke emphasizes the equality of Jesus with God the Father. Jesus expressed His anger that the people failed to give consideration to women; for them, the donkey and ox were more valuable than the women. Then Jesus called their attention to the condition of that woman, “Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” (Lk 13, 16). Thus, Jesus expressed the importance of the subject under discussion. It was not just a simple healing that happened here. By calling her “a daughter of Abraham” Jesus is highlighting the importance of the person and her equality with all the people of Israel, as heirs to the promises given to Abraham. She was a person among the chosen people, like any other person in Israel and she has dignity and rights.

The qualification “Satan bound her for eighteen long years”, points to a deeper enslavement than possession by an evil spirit. It refers to the inequality that existed in that society. She was subjected to marginalization and slavery. The burden the society imposed upon her was so great that she could not stand straight; she was the symbol of all the women in the society.

Jesus is doing here exactly what God did for the people of Israel in the Exodus Event, as is reported in the Book of Leviticus: “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect” (Lev 26,13). This is what God has demanded through the prophet: “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?” This is what God wishes to do through the Savior, Jesus Christ. The woman who stood erect and praised God was a clear expression of the liberation God wished to accomplish for the people.

No more she is afraid. No more the law can push her into the periphery because it was the Lord who called her to the forefront of the society and freed her from the burden on her back. Hereafter, she would stand erect and praise God aloud. The joy she experienced inside would come out as praise to glorify God. She was a new creation as Jesus freed her from every yoke and she became deeply aware that she is precious in the eyes of the Lord. All these were expressed in her praising God loudly and publicly.

The liberation of a person and that also of an old woman bent down made the Synagogue president furious. This approach of Jesus shook the foundation of the corrupt religious institution of which he is a part. However, the freedom of an unfortunate woman made the people happy. They knew that what they witnessed in the Synagogue was an example of the comprehensive liberation Jesus provided. Hence “The entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing”. This was the reason for the joy they experienced and Luke presented it as the conclusion of the episode.

God gives total liberation and that was the goal of the coming of the Son of God into the world. Those who experience it will be filled with joy and their lips would sing praises of God. It is the Divine plan that all must experience this joy. To make it a reality, each one must know the things that keep them bound and be ready to renounce them. One must put down the burden one carrying and then stand erect before God and sing praises to Him with a deep awareness that each soul is precious in the eyes of the Lord.

## 18.

### When a Treasure is found

*“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Mt 13,44).*

In April 1943 my parents migrated to Kulathuvayala village in the District of Kozhikode, Kerala, India. I was only 9 months old at the time. There was a saying that stuck in my childhood memories. “The pig that ran away was bigger”. We cleared the forest to put up a hut and to plant the agricultural products. Wild pigs used to come in groups to destroy the Banana trees and tapioca plants. There was a man who had an ordinary gun. He fired at the group of pigs and a big one was hit. While he was loading the gun again the herd of swine ran away. An elderly man who stood at the fallen pig exclaimed: “The pig that ran away was bigger”. It became a saying to express the general attitude that one does not feel the joy of getting something but regret and feel sad over that was lost or what was missed.

This is not only about the pig or to be limited to the time the farmer using gun to protect the crops. Some people are not satisfied with anything. Their interest is in accumulating more and more wealth as they are not satisfied with what they have.

We can consider this saying as a part of the consumer culture. People are unhappy because they are not satisfied with what they have. They keep on worrying about the things they could not get or cannot get and that make them unhappy. Here we can see the relevance of two parables Jesus said, the parable of the hidden the treasure and the parable of the precious pearl. The stories are relevant for all at all times.

As the conclusion of the sermon about the Kingdom of God in parables, Mathew has reported three short parables, namely, a treasure hidden in a field, precious pearl and the net that collects all kinds of fish (Mt 13, 44-48). These three parables are seen only in the gospel of Mathew. Of these the first two deal with the same theme presented in two different areas of life. One found something precious and is willing to sell all that he has in order to own that treasure. Though there are some differences in the details, the nature and aim of the parables are the same.

The first parable is from the field of agriculture. As there were no banks as we have today, people usually hid their wealth such as gold, silver or gems in the holes they dug in the fields as the one who got only one "Talent" did (Mt 25, 18). If the one who hid the treasure die or become unable to take it for some reason, it would continue as the hidden treasure. Such a treasure was found by a worker who was digging the field. He was ready to sell all that he had to buy that field. It reveals two things: 1. The field did not belong to him; he was only a hired worker. 2. The treasure was extremely valuable.

The most important thing in this parable is his attitude; the joy he experienced for finding the treasure that is more valuable than all that he had. He is not unhappy or sad to sell all that he had because what he was going to get was much more valuable. The same could be said about the merchant who was going in search of precious pearls. He found a Jewel that was more

valuable than any gem he has found before. When compared to that, the jewels he had and preserved were worth nothing. In order to get that precious pearl he would happily sell all that he had collected. He did it and felt happy about it

In these parables, the treasure in the field was found accidentally while the pearl was found as the result of the merchant's search. Regardless of how it happened, they both felt totally happy with what they got. Thus, the Kingdom of God would provide total satisfaction and happiness to the one who become a member of it.

The parables give emphasis not to the selling but to the possession of something precious to them. The Kingdom of God is more precious and will provide more happiness than what one has hoped, experienced or expected. Compared to that joy, everything else will be meaningless and worthless. Hence one is willing to lose all that one has to become a member of the Kingdom of God. It is like getting a beautiful house and compound in the city center in exchange of 10 Acres of land on a hill, near the forest that is constantly attacked by wild animals, making it impossible to live there or to plant something in that land. Nobody would think that it is a loss but a gain.

The Kingdom of God is a precious gift that no one can estimate its value. The experience of "the Kingdom of God" makes one, the child of God and that is a gratuitous gift. Jesus became man to invite us into that experience of the Kingdom of God. There is no bargaining but accept this gift happily for which one has to happily renounce anything that is an obstacle in receiving the Kingdom of God. The gift God gives us is invaluable.

In conclusion rather than feeling regret over the size of the pig that ran away, one should become aware of the value of what was caught and be happy about it. When we become aware

of the value of the gift God has given us our happiness would increase. This would provide a foretaste of heaven and that would lead us to total happiness to the point that we will want nothing else. This is the experience Paul is speaking about in his letter to his most beloved church in Philippi: “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him”

For the one who has found and got a taste of the Kingdom of God, no suffering will be too much. Like the martyrs who walked into the mouth of the wild beasts, burning furnace and drawn sword singing songs of praise, seeing eternal happiness in front of them and saying, one will always be able to say with the apostle Paul “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Cor 9, 15).

## 19.

### Joy of finding the lost

*“Just so, 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).*

Among all the three Synoptic Gospels, it is Luke who gives greater importance for the theme of joy and so it is often called the Gospel of joy. A resounding sense of joy could be found from the beginning (1,14) to the end of the Gospel (24, 52-53). The feeling of joy is most evident in Chapter 15 which is called the heart of the Gospel or the Gospel of Gospels.

Chapter 15 narrates three parables: 1. The lost sheep; 2. The lost coin; and 3. The prodigal son. Though these titles of the parables are generally approved, they fail to express the full meaning of the parables. The main characters are not the lost sheep, lost coin or the son who went away but the shepherd who searches for the sheep, the house mother who searches for the coin and the Father who waits for the return of the son. All three parables present the joy they experience when they found what were lost. Of the three parables, the first two will be analyzed in this chapter while the third one will be discussed in the next chapter.

When one studies a passage of the Bible, its context must be taken into consideration. The context in which the author reports an event or a teaching will have much to tell about the meaning of the event as well as its importance in the entire book. Luke has placed these two parables, approximately at the center of the gospel; and these are situated in a context of contradictory response of the audience to Jesus' life and teachings as is evident from the introduction Luke himself composes: "All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15, 1-2). While the so called "sinners" listened to Jesus, those who considered themselves to be "holy" insulted Him and rejected Him. These two attitudes should be kept in mind while dealing with these parables.

The audience of Jesus was familiar with the incident of a shepherd searching for the lost sheep. The sheep that lost the way and was wandering in the wilderness could fall into some dangers, such as falling into a ditch or thorn bush, or could become prey to wild beasts. When the sheep stays with the group it is safe but when it goes away from the group it could fall into any danger. Hence the good shepherd leaves the herd in the wilderness and goes in search of the lost one. When it is found, he feels happy and would carry it on his shoulders with great joy. Upon reaching home, he would call his friends to celebrate and to share his joy. It is a story that was familiar to the people who listened to Jesus, but what is he intending to communicate with this common incident?

Jesus explained its meaning. The sheep and shepherd are symbols. There are two kinds of sheep: the ones that are obedient and stay with the group and they stand for the people who remain faithful to God. The sheep that went



away symbolizes the people who break the laws and walk in the path of sin. They lost everything and expect to receive eternal punishment. The tax collectors and sinners belong to this group. The Pharisees and Scribes belonged to the obedient group. Then comes the unexpected and surprising statement. “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). Here two words deserve special attention. **“Repent”**: *“Metanoein-Metanoia”* is the Greek word translated as Repent, which means accept the mistake one committed and feel bad about it. But the Greek word has a deeper meaning that is “change your mind, accept a new attitude. The emphasis is not on the mistake one committed, but on the new attitude and lifestyle one should have. There is a confession of the mistake committed and a resolution not to repeat it again. The first step in this process is accepting the mistake one made or awareness of the sin committed. One who cannot accept mistake will not consent to the need of change and that is called hypocrisy about which Jesus scolded the Pharisees and the Scribes. What is meant is a real conversion, a total change in mentality, the vision of life, the way one views oneself and the others; in short become a new person.

The second word under consideration is “joy in heaven”. Heaven stands for God. Mathew called “Kingdom of heaven” what is usually known as “Kingdom of God”. Because of the deep respect and awe, the Jews did not pronounce the name “Yahweh”. Instead of saying God, because of the reverence they would use a circumlocution, “The most High”; “The One in Heaven”; “The Almighty”; “The Lord”. In this situation the people who listened to Jesus knew that Jesus meant that God will be happy about a sinner who repents. God does not want anyone to lose eternal life.

In the story of lost sheep, the focus is on the shepherd while in the story of the “lost coin”, the focus is on the woman. Luke gives equal importance to men and women in the Gospel he wrote. The lost coin was valuable to her though she still had nine with her. The shepherd and the woman did not want to lose even one; they are the symbol of the heavenly Father. All through the Bible we see God in search of the lost individuals, a search that started in the paradise where He was looking for the man and the woman who were hiding from His presence due to the fear of having disobeyed His commandment. The last step of that search is the Incarnation of the Son of God as man.

These two parables give some insight into the character of God. He is not a judge who searches for the sinner to punish. God is the loving Father who desires not to lose any individual and is willing to do all that was needed to save him. Jesus who said these stories is the true image of that loving Father (Col 1, 15). The purpose of the Incarnation is to search out sinners and guide them to the Father “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mk 2, 17); see also “The Son of Man has come to seek out and to save the lost” (Lk 19.10):

God is in search of the lost one and when found He rejoices and all in heaven participate in that joy. So, no sinner need to feel dejected but repent over the sins and return to the loving Father who is waiting for them. Listen to the invitation of the Good Shepherd who comes not to punish but to dress the wounds and to take you home to the Father. This should be the beginning of repentance and a new life and also the source of our joy.

## 20.

### Father's Joy

*“Quickly, bring out a robe-- the best one-- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate” (Lk 15, 22-24).*

Luke chapter 15 describes the joy of God at the conversion of a sinner through three parables of which two have been analyzed in the previous chapter. Here we study the third parable, usually known as “The parable of the prodigal son”.

This parable has an important place in the world literature. Only a part of the message is conveyed through the title prodigal son. There are three characters in the story, namely, the Father and two sons. The main character in the parable is the Father and the main theme of the parable is his attitude, the unlimited love he has for his sons.

Since the story is familiar to all, there is no need of narrating it in detail. The main character in the story, the Father has two sons. As the younger son demanded, the father gave him his share of the property. He sold his property and went away with the money and lived in luxury. Soon the money was over and his friends left him. Alone and empty handed, hungry and guilt

ridden, he searched for a job. Finally he got the job of feeding the pigs but that was hardly enough to fill his stomach. His story is presented in four sentences.

There are certain important points in this description. It does not say why the younger son demanded his share. He might have felt suffocated by the rules and regulations in his father's house; that might have prompted him to cash his property and go away. However, there is one thing that is not mentioned in the story. Usually only after the death of the Father, the sons would get their share. Taking the share and going away while the Father is alive is equal to considering his Father dead or he wanted to cut off his relationship with the Father and family. Without any resistance the Father gave him his share.

After squandering all his money, he had no way of living and the job he got was to take care of pigs and that explains his pathetic condition. For the Jews, pigs were unclean animals. Not only was he appointed to take care of pigs, but his condition was so miserable that he desired to eat the pods that the pigs were eating. When he was in the bottom of the pit, he began to think of his Father's house and that is the most important part of the first part of the story.

He had a rude awakening into the reality of his life. He understood the fatal mistakes he made in his life. RSV Bible says, "He came to himself" which contains deep meaning and nuances. He began to think of his present state: Who am I? Where am I now? How did I reach this situation? He began to regret the selfish paths he travelled and the miserable situation he reached.

His present misery made him aware of the life he had in his Father's house. He compared his life to that of the servants there. It prepared his mind for a return to his Father. That was real conversion. He made a decision that changed his life, "I will get up and go to my Father" (Lk 15, 18). He understood the

worthlessness of his freedom that made his life miserable and that helped him to make a decision to go back to his Father.

The confession he prepared to present to his Father was interesting. He sinned; lost his son ship; he did not expect to get back his position in the family but would beg his Father to accept him as a servant. He explained the reason that the servants in his Father's house could eat to their fill and that is all he wanted, nothing else. Hunger and the hope to get enough food forced him to return home. Recalling all that he wanted to say to his Father, he walked back reluctantly, feeling humiliated and ashamed. The picture of a repented sinner!

But the picture of the Father, Jesus paints, is totally different. The Father recognizes his son from a distance which gives the impression that the Father had been waiting for his return ever since he left the house. Forgetting himself, the Father ran to his son, embraced him and ordered his servants to remove his torn clothes and to put on him the best garment possible. As a sign of accepting him back as his son, he was given the best garments, ring for his finger and sandals for his feet.

Not satisfied with the above, the fatted calf was killed to prepare a banquet to celebrate the son's return. At that time they used to fatten a calf with special food to be used on special occasions. This detail takes special importance in the elder son's accusation (15,10). The Father was ready to "Get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate" (Lk 15, 23-24). The whole household began to have a great celebration because the lost son has returned; the dead son has become alive. The great joy the Father experienced in his heart came out as a big celebration.

Through this parable Jesus is describing how God the Father deals with a sinner who repents and returns to Him. God does

not take back the freedom He gave man. It is not the obedience of a slave but the love of a son that God expects from people. Man has the freedom to reject Him, to go away but God awaits the return of the sinner with a loving heart. The love of God is always with His children. That love has no limit and it was that love that prompted the prodigal son to return to his father.

The image of God who loves the sinner, awaits his repentance and return to Him, gives hope to all, encourages the return journey. There is only one thing needed and that is you confess your sins and believe in the forgiving love of God. This return would make both the sinner and the Father who awaits his return happy. There will be a great celebration in heaven for a repented sinner. This is a beautiful picture of the love of God. The story could have ended here but Jesus continued.

In the second part of the parable, the Father and the elder son are the main characters. The elder son was out and refused to enter the house. The attempt of the Father to reason with him led to an outburst of anger. All the feelings he had suppressed came out; hatred for the younger brother, his hopes and desires and lack of concern for the Father came out like a torrential rain of negative feelings. All those years he had been like a slave in his own home. He did not break any of the laws because he was afraid of the consequences. The Father did not give him even a young goat to celebrate with his friends. Above all, he was angry that the Father accepted and celebrated the return of the son who came back after squandering all the wealth. He listed his complains like a litany.

The attitude of the Father deserves special attention. He told the elder son that all that he had, belonged to him and advised him to rejoice that his brother had come back and assured him that his return will not make him lose anything. There is room for both of them in the heart of the Father. It is only natural to show compassion to the one who lost everything and came back.

The elder son called his brother, “your son” as if he had no relationship with the younger brother. The older one was not ready to accept the younger son. However, the Father addressed the younger one, “Your brother” and that contained an advice and a warning. For the Father both are sons and it would continue that way. Though the elder son will be heir to the family estate, he must be willing to stay with his brother in the home.

The elder son had to make a decision. The celebration in the house will continue and to participate in that joy, he had to accept his brother and remain in the house. The context presented in the beginning of the chapter is relevant here. The so called “holy” Pharisees and Scribes must see themselves in the elder son. They also need a conversion by becoming deeply aware of their arrogant attitudes. When the story ends, the elder son and the Father stand outside the house. The listeners must decide if they should enter the house or not.

The message of the parable is always relevant. All are in need of conversion. God is waiting to receive the repented sinner as the return would give joy to God and to all in heaven. This is the true experience of the Kingdom of God. Apostle Paul has said, “The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14,17). All are invited to participate in this joy but to do so one has to renounce feelings of superiority and the arrogant attitude that considers all others as sinners. One must be ready to follow the instruction of St. Paul, “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are” (Rom 12, 16). The final statement of the Father is a promise and an invitation. “Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But, we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (Lk 15, 31-32).

## 21.

### Salvation to this House

Luke 19, 1-10

*“He hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham” (Lk 19, 6-9).*

He was a rich man, may be the richest man in the city. As permitted by the Roman ruler, he used any device available to extort money from the people. However, he was not happy and he felt emptiness in his heart. How Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in Jericho filled the emptiness with joy, is narrated in the Gospel of Luke 19, 1-10.

The Evangelist presents him as the chief tax collector. He was not like Levi who collected taxes, sitting at the station. Zacchaeus was a high ranking officer under whom many people worked. To understand the position and the problem of Zacchaeus one has to have an understanding of the political and economic structure that existed in Palestine in Jesus' time.



It was in 63 B.C. that the Roman army under Pompey conquered Palestine and established Roman rule. Herod, with the help and blessing of Rome, became king of Palestine in 40 B.C. After his death in B.C. 4, the kingdom was divided into four provinces and his sons took charge of these various provinces with the approval of Rome. Being dissatisfied with Archelaus, Rome removed him from being the ruler of Judea in A.D. 6 and banished him to Gaul. Thereafter Judea was under the direct rule of Rome through a procurator. Herod Antipas, another son of Herod the great who was ruling over Galilee was sent into exile in A.D. 39. Philip, another son of Herod the Great ruled over the Northern region of Ituraea and Taconites till 41 AD. Though the sons of Herod ruled the provinces, they were appointed and controlled by Rome whose sole interest was in collecting the money. They cared for the law and order of the country only in so far it was necessary to collect taxes.

More than 30% of the gross income was taken by Rome as various types of taxes such as land tax, income tax, sales tax and personal tax. They appointed local people to collect the taxes. The person who offered the highest amount was appointed as the tax officer in each province. These officers would appoint tax collectors to go around and collect the taxes. That is how Zacchaeus became a high ranking officer.

Zacchaeus was responsible for collecting tax in an area. The amount to be given to Rome was fixed but there was no limit to the amount they could collect from the people. Hence the tax collectors squeezed as much as possible from the people. That is why John the Baptist told the tax collectors "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you" (Lk 3, 13). They could get the help of the Roman soldiers if someone refused to pay the tax. If someone was not able to or refused to pay, the tax collector could confiscate his property and if that was not sufficient could even sell the person as slave. Hence the tax collectors were detested by the society and considered them as sinners.

Zacchaeus was such a hated officer and according to the Jewish law he was denied salvation. Even according to the teaching of Jesus, he was outside the Kingdom of God as indicated by the simile of camel and the eye of the needle (Lk 18, 25). Through the episode of Zacchaeus, Luke describes the great miracle of a “Camel” passing through the “Eye of the needle”. Through this story, the Evangelist was explaining step by step how Zacchaeus, who was rich and a sinner attained salvation, calls our attention to the real source of happiness and how to get it.

The story begins with the desire of Zacchaeus to see Jesus. Zacchaeus had heard that Jesus was a great Rabbi, miracle worker, who proclaimed the Word of God in a touching way and so he desired to see him. All that he wanted was just see him, nothing more. But, there were many obstacles. Since Jesus was walking in the middle of the people, it would be difficult for Zacchaeus to see him as he was short in stature. He was afraid to walk into the crowd without the support of soldiers because he feared that the people who hated him would try to hurt him.

Then he thought of the sycamore tree filled with leaves where he could hide and watch Jesus passing by. He ran to the tree, ahead of the crowd, climbed it and hid himself among the leaves as he wanted to see Jesus by all means.

Next comes the surprising response of Jesus who stood under the tree, looked up and saw Zacchaeus. They saw each other and Zacchaeus felt content and happy. But, Jesus did not stop there, but asked: “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Lk 19, 5). There was no limit to the joy he experienced as if “He had asked for a flower but got a garden”. To understand his feeling, one has to analyze not only what was said about the condition of the tax collectors but also each word Jesus spoke.

Jesus stood under the tree, looked up and saw Zacchaeus. It was not an accidental response on the part of Jesus but a

decision he made. The Lord will search for anyone who wishes to see Him and call him/her by name. All that Zacchaeus expected was to see the passing Jesus but now He called to come to Him. He hurried down from the tree and felt that the time of loneliness and isolation was over. A new stage was starting in his life. It was the decision of God the Father that Jesus must stay that day in the house of Zacchaeus. The expression: “for I must stay at your house today” (19, 5) points to a divine imperative. The Greek word which is translated as I must is “Dei”. It points to a necessity that is decided by God. One should also notice that the word today comes twice in this narrative. The awareness that it was God’s own decision that Jesus was to stay in his house today, made a radical change in Zacchaeus. Filled with joy, he came down, ran ahead of Jesus to his home, and opened the doors for Him and welcomed Jesus and His followers.

Zacchaeus felt a deep joy in his heart that all the wealth he accumulated had not given him. The feeling of emptiness vanished and the joy that filled his heart gushed forth in words marking a turning point in his life: “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much” (Lk 19, 8). Once Jesus accepted him, he did not care about the wealth he accumulated, he was like the farmer who found the treasure hidden in the field or the merchant who found the precious jewel. No one compelled him to give away his wealth but he did it willingly and happily. He was ready to return all that he had earned unjustly, more than the amount prescribed by the law (Lev.5; Num 5,6-7; Ex 22,1). Zacchaeus accepted his mistake and did the penance more than the law prescribed because he felt happy and peaceful as he was able to give hospitality to Jesus in his house rather than just have a glance of Him. Jesus was addressed as “Lord” and it was a profession of faith that Jesus is God. With an irrevocable decision, the Lord had decided

to accept his hospitality; that was something far beyond the imagination and hope of Zacchaeus.

Immediately Jesus responded to the decision of Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham" (Lk 19, 9). Zacchaeus experienced himself becoming a person accepted in the society. No more he has to fear to face the people. Here is a visible proof for the fact that nothing is impossible for God. Here we see rich man entering the Kingdom of God by radically changing his life; in other words "The camel passing through the eye of a needle". God does not want anyone to be lost. That is why Jesus has come "To seek out and to save the lost" (Lk 19, 10). This was the revelation of God's plan of salvation fulfilled through Jesus.

The analysis of the conversion that took place step by step could shed some light into our personal lives. God initiates everything. The desire in the heart was prompted by the Holy Spirit. "When you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it"(Is 30, 21). When a person moves according to that inspiration, God will guide the next step and thus step by step, one would attain the joy of encountering the Lord. Then all that one had accumulated until then would appear meaningless. The person who has experienced God's love in this way would want nothing but the Lord. The heart will be filled with pure happiness and will be inspired to renounce all that prevents from experiencing that joy.

This experience was not unique to Zacchaeus but it is true of all those who have had a real God encounter. It would make the material gains unimportant and stop one from worrying about people's attitude as the person is filled with an inner joy. That is what God offers to His children and it is available to all those who are open to receiving this blessing.

## 22.

### **Living is Christ and dying is gain**

*“It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (Phil 1, 20-21).*

This was not the original attitude of Saul. That young man from Tarsus, Saul, was resolved to exterminate the followers of Jesus and wipe out His name from the face of the earth. He was a Roman citizen who was well educated in Greek culture from the world famous University of Tarsus. A zealous Pharisee, he came to Jerusalem to study Jewish Laws and traditions of his ancestors, at the feet of the famous Rabbi, Gamaliel.

In Jerusalem he came into contact with a group called Christians who followed Jesus of Nazareth who was condemned by the supreme Jewish authority, the Sanhedrin for blasphemy and crucified by the Romans as a revolutionary. Those Christians were creating division even among the Jews saying that Jesus is the expected Messiah, that he is equal to God and that he has risen from the dead. He came from Galilee, the land of revolutionaries, called Zealots. First some young people joined him but with his death they were scattered, but soon they

came together again. When some young people, like Stephen, well trained both in the Greek as well as in the Jewish culture, who were newly converted to the Jewish faith, joined them, the Christians became a serious threat to the Jewish religion.

The Christians had supporters even among the members of the holy Sanhedrin. Saul feared if those Christians were allowed to grow the very existence of the Jewish religion would be endangered. The ordinary Jews were in a crisis when the Christians used the Sacred Scripture and teachings of the Prophets to prove that the prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus whom they claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God. They argued using the Word of God and the Jewish leadership tried and failed to defeat them using the same Bible.

Seeing the Jewish leadership fail to disprove the arguments put forward by Stephen, Saul became furious and he took the initiative to stone him to death, accusing him of blasphemy. Then Saul made an oath to himself that he would not allow any Christian to live and he would prevent another Jew joining them. He was convinced that only the Jewish religion was the true faith and all the others were heretics. He had no hesitation to kill or die for the Truth. As he learned that there were many Jews in Damascus who had converted to Christianity, he was on the way with an army to arrest them all and force them either to return to Jewish faith or kill them. He had secured the permission of the Sanhedrin for the same.

All of a sudden everything turned upside down. At a distance he saw the watch towers of Damascus and he proceeded with the hope of fulfilling his mission without delay. Then suddenly a lightening from the sky struck him and a terrible voice resounded in his ears. Everything happened in a split second and when he became conscious, he realized that he was lying on the ground. Though his eyes were open he could

see nothing. Could light make one blind? He did not understand anything. For the first time in life he experienced fear!!

Then he heard a calm but powerful voice calling his name, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9, 4). He wondered who was calling with such care and overflowing love and mercy. He began to question if he was standing in this world, in heaven, or in hell. Then a figure appeared in the mist. Trembling with fear, he asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9, 5). Saul wondered if the sound came from outside, or it resounded in his ears or in the depth of his heart.

He was shocked with the answer, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”. All that he was trying to protect, all that he had believed to build up, fell down like a sand castle. All that he considered as truth has become falsehood. Here in front of him stood Jesus in the midst of light. He wondered if he was dreaming or having a vision! Is this the same Jesus whom he considered as a blasphemer who was misleading the people? Was it His followers that he tried to wipe away from the face of the earth? He looked around to find his friends but saw no one. Then he heard that sound again, with a loving direction!

“Get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do” (Acts 9, 6). That was a turning point in his life. It was the beginning of a new life. He realized that all that he believed, all that he learned were meaningless. He came to a rude awakening that Jesus of Nazareth whom he considered as a false prophet, blasphemer is the true Savior, not only of the people of Israel but of all the peoples of the world. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the prophecies about the Messiah and it was for Him the whole world was waiting. The blindness he experienced now was a symbol of his past life. All that he thought to be true was false. The blindness symbolized the total ignorance of the truth which he had thought was a lie. Now his inner eyes opened to this new realization and awareness.

Here began the transformation of a religious fanatic into a zealous missionary of Jesus Christ. It was Jesus who took the initiative for this transition. Saul was not a wicked or cruel person but misguided in his faith conviction. Now God in whom he believed interfered in his life and turned it upside down. In a split second an unfathomable mystery was revealed to him; a mystery to meditate and to live for the rest of his life. It would require the meditation of whole life to grasp it. The religious fanatic Saul became the zealous missionary, Paul.

Through the Damascus experience Paul came to two fundamental convictions: 1. Jesus Christ is God, equal to God the Father and is omnipresent, beyond time and space. Rising from the dead He has defeated the power of death and sees and knows all that is happening in the world. Jesus knows and loves everybody. 2. Jesus is present in his disciples. When a person is persecuted Jesus suffers the pain. It was this Jesus whom Saul was persecuting, accusing him of blasphemy. When he tried to wipe out Christians from the face of the earth, he was persecuting Jesus who lives in his followers. This new awareness thoroughly changed him, and put him on the path of becoming a new person with new attitudes and goals

The sound stopped. No more light and everything returned to the previous state. Those who accompanied him did not know what happened but they knew that Saul had lost his sight. They guided him to the city. Later through Ananias a Christian disciple at Damascus who laid his hand on and prayed, Paul regained his physical sight. There was only one thing that he now wanted: to know the Son of God, Jesus, who appeared to him like a lightning.

That knowledge he received through a special revelation into the depth of which the “Holy Spirit” guided him. Saul wanted to proclaim it to the whole world, especially to the gentiles.



He wanted to be a witness to the people who did not know Jesus Christ, the Savior of humanity. The people who live in darkness have to see the light that is Christ. He dedicated his life to proclaim Jesus Christ and to attract everyone to that Light.

Until the Damascus experience Saul was ready to die and to kill for what he thought was the truth. But the encounter with Jesus changed all that. He realized that he was to witness for the truth not by killing another but by dying for the cause. The Master taught not to kill but to die for Truth. Dying for him would be a gain, as Saul became convinced of the change of values in him. Saul became Paul which means small. He was ready to become the “little one”, the servant, for Jesus.

It is generally believed that the Damascus experience and conversion of Paul was in 36 A.D. During the persecution of Emperor Nero between 64 and 67 he was beheaded in Rome. During the 30 years Paul had only one aim and that was to know Jesus and to be with Him. He was a powerful witness for Christ among the people especially the Gentiles. Hence he was able to say, “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain”, because death is not the end; it would enable him to be with Christ forever, enjoying eternal life. That is why he said, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil 1, 23). He lived and died in accordance with this basic principle. This should be an inspiring model for everyone.

## 23.

### Rejoice Always

*“We urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 14-18).*

Evangelization was never easy but Paul went forward with the power he received from the Damascus experience. He refused to turn back in spite of the dangers. He moved forward without fearing persecution and taking all the risks that came along the way. Saul who set out to destroy Christianity became an ardent apostle of Jesus Christ and that was something the Jews could not swallow. They waited for him at the gate of Damascus with the intention of killing him. But, “His disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket” (Acts 9, 25). The rest of the journeys were difficult and dangerous.

The second missionary journey (A.D. 49 – 52) was the longest and most adventurous. The Holy Spirit, who did not allow Paul to proclaim the Gospel anywhere in Asia, took him to Philippi, where the first church in Europe was established.

There large number of people readily accepted the Gospel but in a few weeks he had to face strong opposition when he cast out an evil spirit from a girl that predicted the future. The men who was making money using her ability to predict the future, turned against Paul. They seized Paul and his companion Silas and took them to the court. The judge pronounced the punishment without a trial. "After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely" (Acts 16, 23). Probably this also was in his mind when he tells in the second letter to the Corinthians (11,23) that he had been flogged countless times.

The next day he was released following a miracle in the jail but he was forced to leave the area. Next we see Paul at Thessalonica, about 150 KM South West of Philippi. Thessalonica was the capital of the province of Macedonia and the second biggest city in the Eastern Empire of Rome after Byzantium. It was a harbor town where many High ways met. As usual first he went and preached in the Synagogue. After preaching for three Sabbaths, a few Jews and a large number of Gentiles believed in the Gospel and accepted Jesus Christ as the Savior. The Jews became jealous and turned the people against Paul. "When they could not find him, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also" (Acts 17, 6)

Paul and his companions were known as "people who have been turning the world upside down". The Gospel Paul preached had such power that it shook the foundation of unjust systems and institutions, political as well as religious, rooted in idol worship and corruption. The Good News Paul preached taught them to see all the people as equals because all are the children of God and through their faith in Jesus Christ they have

become heirs of the Kingdom of God. This view challenged the traditional structures and mentality and turned upside down the whole social system. The Gospel message was and is always revolutionary.

Since they could not find Paul and his companions, “After they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go. That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea; and when they arrived they went to the Jewish synagogue” (Acts 17, 9-10). They took bail from Jason to make sure that Paul would not come back. Even after Paul left, the faithful in Thessalonica had to suffer much persecution. Paul could not stay with them, not even a month and help them deepen in their faith; he could not go back there. In this situation Paul wrote his first epistle to the people of Thessalonica while staying in Corinth.

It is generally agreed that of the 13 letters of Paul in the NT, the first letter to the Thessalonians, is historically the first one he wrote. He wrote it in order to help them to remain faithful to Christ, in spite of all the obstacles, to deepen them in their faith, encourage them not to lose heart in the face of persecution, give them hope for the life beyond death and to face suffering and even death with courage.

In this letter, Paul answers many questions such as what would happen to the dead, when Jesus would come back, what is meant by eternal life etc. Jesus who died, rose from the dead and is seated at the right hand of the Father will come back and then the tombs will be opened and all the dead will come back to life. Those who professed the faith in Jesus Christ and lived according to His teaching all the lifelong will enjoy eternal life with Him. After death each person will have to present an account of one's life before God and, “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation

with fear and trembling” (Phil 2, 12). This teaching is relevant to all. However, Christians are not to be guided by fear but joy.

The Christians in Thessalonica had to suffer on account of their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul exhorted them that their suffering will not be in vain because it is participating in the suffering of Jesus. What Paul said to the Church in Philippi, “This is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well” (Phil 1, 28-29) is true for all the faithful.

Those who believe in Jesus Christ and live according to that faith will have to suffer. Jesus had already given the warning: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mk 8, 34; Lk 14, 25-26). This has been true since the beginning of Christianity until now. Hence suffering for our faith is not to be considered as a tragedy, but take it as a gift from God and assurance of eternal life. Accept it as the participation in the suffering of Jesus to attain salvation. We must accept the statement of Apostle Paul as inspiration and model: “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church” (Col 1,24).

The instruction the Apostle gave to the Church in Thessalonica: “This is the will of God, your sanctification:... For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness” (1 Thess 4, 3-7) should remain as the foundation of our lives. There are two aspects of holiness, existential or ontological and ethical or moral. By existential holiness one means what is totally dedicated to God. Persons, places and objects that are consecrated and dedicated to God are called holy. Ethical or moral holiness, on the other hand, means living according to the Will of God, manifested through His commandments. “Indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge

you, beloved, to do so more and more...so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one”(1 Thess 4, 10-12). Jesus gave one commandment that comprises in itself all the commandments given until then, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn 13, 34). The Evangelist has recorded how Jesus loved: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends” (Jn 15, 13).

The characteristic mark of a Christian should be such love and that will fill the heart with joy and then there will be no fear about anything. The suffering encountered will be considered as valuable gift because it will be a participation in the suffering of Jesus. Then, “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4, 7).

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near” (Phil 4, 4-5). The Lord is not only near us but lives in our hearts till the end of time, never leaving us as orphans (Mt 28, 20). That is the source of real joy. The peace and joy the Lord, the indwelling Holy Trinity, gives us cannot be taken away by any force (Jn 14,16. 18.23). As long as the Lord is with us we have nothing to fear. The joy of being with the Lord will fill us with love, power and peace.

## 24.

### Rejoice in Hope

*“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12, 9-21).*

Human life will end in death; that is the everyday experience. This is equally true concerning to the rich and the poor. Then, what is the meaning of this life? Those who deny the existence of God accuse that religion is the opium discovered by the religious leaders to give some consolation to those who suffer. If everything would end with death, then it is only logical that one should enjoy the life as much as possible now. This attitude and way of thinking is called “Epicureanism”. Such thinking as well as a response to it can be found in the Bible.

“Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end, and no one has been known to return from Hades. For we were born by mere chance, and

hereafter we shall be as though we had never been, for the breath in our nostrils is smoke, and reason is a spark kindled by the beating of our hearts; when it is extinguished, the body will turn to ashes, and the spirit will dissolve like empty air. Our name will be forgotten in time, and no one will remember our works; our life will pass away like the traces of a cloud, and be scattered like mist that is chased by the rays of the sun and overcome by its heat. For our allotted time is the passing of a shadow, and there is no return from our death, because it is sealed up and no one turns back. “Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things that exist, and make use of the creation to the full as in youth. Let us take our fill of costly wine and perfumes, and let no flower of spring pass us by. . . .” (Wis 2, 1-20). The Sacred author affirms that this was the line of thought of the people who did not have any faith in God and they lead an immoral life. But he continues to state that it was not the right way of thinking. The most evident revelation about life after death in the Old Testament is seen in the same book, namely, the Book of Wisdom.

“The righteous, though they die early, will be at rest. For old age is not honored for length of time, or measured by number of years; but understanding is gray hair for anyone, and a blameless life is ripe old age. There were some who pleased God and were loved by him, and while living among sinners were taken up. They were caught up so that evil might not change their understanding or guile deceives their souls. For the fascination of wickedness obscures what is good, and roving desire perverts the innocent mind. Being perfected in a short time, they fulfilled long years; for their souls were pleasing to the Lord, therefore he took them quickly from the midst of wickedness” (Wis 4, 7-14). The New Testament clearly teaches that death is not the end but the beginning of a new life. Hence a true Christian lives the short period on earth, with all his thoughts and hopes focused on the fulfillment of his life in heaven.



It is not a rare event that not only unbelievers, but even the faithful give undue importance to material wealth and comfortable life. Unfortunately this tendency is increasing. The flex boards and acknowledgments with thanks for favors received seem to point in this direction. Apparently for many, retreats, prayers and ascetic life are aimed at material favors. Their intention appears to be for miraculous healing, having children, high paying job abroad, high marks in the exams etc. When the list becomes long in this line, one cannot help but wonder if this was the promise of Christ and what the Church is teaching.

When those material benefits are not received, the retreat preachers and councillors seem to tell them that it was because of the curse caused by the sin of the ancestors, a suggestion that creates further confusion. To emphasize the idea they would quote certain Bible passages. But, we need to examine if this is the general teaching of the Bible? Is this in accordance with the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles? Did Jesus promise material wealth and prosperity to his followers?

The answer is a clear No. Jesus did not advice the people to acquire and accumulate material wealth, but to share the wealth one had with the poor, in order to be His follower and to have a share in the Kingdom of God. Jesus did not say “Blessed are you rich” but “Blessed are you poor as the Kingdom of God belongs to you” (Lk 6, 20-23). Then he continued to say, “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6,24).

This earth and its products are given for all the people in the world. We need a social and economic structure that would make material goods available to all according to each one’s need, as it is depicted in the Acts of the Apostles while describing the nature of the primitive Christian community: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but

everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold (4,32-34). The early Christian community practiced the sharing love and that was the sign of Christians. They believed that human life does not end with death. Death was seen as the door opening to eternal life. This faith was based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and His promise of eternal life.

The farewell discourse of Jesus during the Last Supper made the Apostles sad. It was then that Jesus gave the promise that enkindled their hope. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (Jn 14, 1-3). For a disciple of Christ, death is the moment, when the Lord comes to take him to the Father in heaven. It is not a sad event but the moment of bliss as one is being admitted into the eternal home.

An experience I had some twenty years ago, still remains fresh in my mind as a source of hope and joy. On 20 June 2000, I was admitted in the Heart Hospital in Trichur following a blood clot in my brain (Subdural hematoma). Dr. George Kovoov made surgical intervention, digging two holes on my skull and washing out the blood clot. I was discharged after a week's stay at the hospital with the instruction to take rest. After three weeks I was to see the Doctor again. I had complete rest for three weeks and then I returned to Divine Retreat Centre where I was living. While getting out, my head hit the roof of the car. That night I could not sleep as the Blood Pressure went up and I had severe head ache.

The next morning as I saw the Doctor he asked me if I had hit my head. The scan result showed that there was more blood in the brain and I was taken back to the Operation Theater. Since the hole made earlier was there in the skull, he could draw out the blood with a syringe. About 2 ounce of blood was aspirated and then he told me to rest. The Doctor left after telling me not to shake my head. That afternoon about 3:30 I had the experience that shook my life and gave me new insights.

About 3:00 PM. I was in the A.C room in the hospital. Suddenly I began to sweat and at the same time my fingers in my hands and feet felt cold. My sister, who is a medical Doctor since 1974 and belongs to the MSMI congregation, felt something was wrong and called the nurse who called the Doctor. The doctor came rushing in. After checking my pulse and eyes he said that I was sinking and there is not much hope and so inform all those who are to be notified. Rev. Fr. Panackal, the director of the divine retreat center came with a group and started praying for me. Call went to the Bishop's house in Tellicherry and they told all the convents and parishes to pray for me.

I was not aware of any of these. I reached a state that I could neither see nor hear anything. However, my mind was alert but not aware of the surroundings. Slowly my mind became calm, no pain and no thoughts. I saw a light that kept on increasing and I was standing in front of a cool but powerful light. I could see nothing but the light. From the middle of the light I heard a calm voice, "You are welcome Home". It was almost like the feeling I had when my parents without words told me "Welcome Home", as I came back after a stay of 15 years in Rome for studies.

I have no idea how I heard the sound. Was it only in my inside or did it come from outside? I was not sure if I was still alive in this world or dead and reached the door of heaven. I was

not aware of my surroundings. All I could feel was that I was standing in front of my God who is my Father and Mother who stood there with both hands extended in a gesture of love and affection. There was no scolding, no accusation, no questioning. When I talk about it, I see the picture of the Father who received the prodigal son who returned home.

I do not know how long I stayed in that state. In between the Doctor came and gave me injection many times. I remained there as if dead. Later, I heard that I opened my eyes only after about two hours. I had no desire to return to this life that I had left. Apparently God had more plans for me. Even after twenty years that experience stays with me as a strong inspiration.

After that I began to see the promises of Jesus and the witnesses of the Apostles in a new light. It gave me certain valuable convictions and became a guide in my path. The most important among them is the words of St. Paul who assures that, there will be resurrection for all: “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor 15, 58).

Life does not end here. No good deed will be in vain. All of them would help us in our journey to the heavenly home. Hope in Jesus would lead us beyond death. “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15, 19). What we hope for is eternal life with God and that hope is the source of our happiness.

Our joy is in hope and hope is for our salvation. “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Rom 8, 24-25). Our hope is for the total freedom and happiness of the children of God. Faith teaches us that there are things beyond our sight. Life, death and resurrection

of Jesus remain as the foundation of our faith. “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2, 9). There are no words to describe the joys of eternal life with God.

Jesus taught us that we do not have to wait until the end of the world to attain this blessing. That is what He told the crucified criminal who prayed to Jesus, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23, 43). The life in the paradise starts with death, but would reach its completion with the end of the world or with the coming of the New Heaven and New Earth.

The picture of heaven depicted in the last book of the Bible, Book of revelation: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev 21, 1-4). This is what God has prepared for us in heaven and that is the source of our hope.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil 4, 4). The Lord Jesus is holding us by hand and He will never let it go; He will lead us to the Heavenly Father. Let us follow Him with faith and joy and never slip away into our own path.

## 25.

### Rejoice in the Weakness

*“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12, 9-10).*

Paul was a zealous, strong, courageous and powerful Apostle. He had tried to wipe out the Christian faith from the face of the earth. But after the encounter with Jesus at the gate of Damascus, he dedicated his entire life to proclaim Jesus with more enthusiasm and zeal. He was convinced that nothing or no one could turn him away from proclaiming Jesus. He worked hard and suffered untold difficulties and persecution during his journeys of proclaiming Jesus

The conversion of Paul is described in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book, Acts of the Apostles. From the fact that Luke, while writing the early history of the Church in the Acts, has set aside 17 out of 28 chapters to describe the activities of Paul, one can see the importance of Paul in the life of the early Church. Paul had only one goal in his life as he himself has declared: “If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for

an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" (1 Cor 9, 16). How can one state more forcefully his conviction, goal and decision?

Paul travelled as if he was on fire, with the solitary goal of bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ, whom he encountered and whose love he experienced, to as many people as possible. All must know the love of God and live in true happiness and finally gather in the house of the Father, heaven. Only that would give fulfillment to his life. "The love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died" (2 Cor 5, 14).

The Greek word used for "urge" was "*Sunecho*" which means motivate, inspire, strengthen or force. It also means to compel with great force, to an extent that one cannot help but do it. When a rider presses his feet on the side of the horse, it would run fast. The Apostle says that such a force is placed on him by the love of Jesus that he cannot help but go on proclaiming the Gospel with the sole thought that all must come to know Jesus.

He travelled without rest for the sake of proclaiming the Gospel. Luke has described three missionary Journeys of Paul. All three were to new areas where no one has gone with the intention of proclaiming the Gospel. He travelled by foot, on horseback, by ship and all the available means of transportation to reach new areas. When he said, "By the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the Good News of Christ" (Rom 15,19), one can imagine the enthusiasm he had and the extension of his journeys.

Those journeys were difficult and often people did not welcome him. He faced many obstacles, accidents, oppositions and persecutions in the process of preaching the Good News. Paul

has given an account of the suffering he went through, “Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman-- I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (2 Cor 11, 23-30).

This is neither a lamentation nor a list of complaints. Those were the sufferings he accepted with joy to imitate and work for the Master, Jesus Christ to whom he belonged: “Christ Jesus has made me His own” (Phil 3,12) He considered them as the loving gifts the Lord gave him. The love of Christ compelled him to accept all that suffering and he presented them in front of the faithful in the Church in Corinth to encourage them and to inspire them to accept persecution on account of their faith. There were marks of these persecutions on his body.

“From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body” (Gal 6, 17). This statement has been misunderstood in many ways. Some think that Paul had received *Stigmata* and he was the first one to receive the five wounds of Jesus in his body. Jesus had received much more than five wounds. The name *Stigmata* came because of the five deep wounds caused by the nails in his hands and feet and



by the lance on his side. In reality Jesus had countless wounds on his body. The Romans did not count the scourging. The rule that a person must not be inflicted more 40 beatings was valid only among the Jews. Paul talked about the marks on his body as a final statement during the discussion about circumcision. Nobody knows how many wounds were inflicted on him when the Jews beat him five times and the Romans three times. His body was full of wound marks and he presented them as a trophy, the reward he received from Jesus.

However, there was something that disturbed him and he prayed to have it removed but it did not happen. Finally he accepted it and said, “Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness...” (2 Cor 12, 7-9). Nobody knows what was meant by this “Thorn in the flesh”. Some think it was his hot temper while others believe that it was some illness he used to have once in a while; still others hold that it was some severe temptation. No one knows for sure what was this “Thorne” and the Apostle did not wish to reveal it.

However, without doubt we can say that all his life he proclaimed the Gospel with great enthusiasm and he did not consider any suffering as an obstacle for it. In spite of the weakness, he dedicated his entire life to proclaim the Gospel. He shared it to inspire anyone who would set out for Evangelization and to warn them that there will be suffering along the way but the Lord can work through and in our weaknesses. Such suffering could eliminate pride which would make a person think that everything happened due to his ability and holiness. This confession was to help anyone who has the tendency to think too highly of oneself and boast about it.

Paul always confessed that it was not he but Christ who lives in him that is operating through him. The “thorn” was given to him so that he would always remember that it is Christ who works in and through him. It did not lead him to despair but made him happy about it: “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12,10). This was a great model and a powerful reminder. We should never forget that we are instruments in the hands of the Lord.

## 26.

### Rejoice in the Loss

*“Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith” (Phil 3, 7-9).*

From an objective point of view, it was not a pleasant situation for Paul. It was from the prison that Paul wrote to his beloved Church in Philippians. Interpreters are not sure from which prison he wrote the letter. Some say it was from Rome but others think that it was from Ephesus. Whichever may have been the place, the situation was drastic. There was all the possibility that the next day his body would become the food for wild animals. The question Paul asked sheds some light on the location, “If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it?” (1 Cor 15, 32).

Paul was writing, seeing his death in front. But, he felt no fear, despair or any sense of loss. From the Damascus experience, he knew that all the worldly gains were nothing in

comparison to gaining Christ. He wanted to know Jesus and he was ready to live or die in order to remain with Him. That is all he wanted in his life as in his thoughts, words, desires, hopes and expectations, there was only Christ.

Paul said, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2, 20). The source of his power was the conviction that Christ lived in him and his life was for Christ. He was like the farmer who found the great treasure or the merchant who discovered the precious Jewel (Mt. 13, 44-46). Having encountered Jesus, all that he had considered as gain became rubbish. Such a great transformation took place in his life and only Jesus could quench his spiritual thirst. He desired to know Jesus more and more and for that he was willing to undergo any amount of suffering as the suffering brought him closer to Christ.

Paul was a Pharisee who knew all the Jewish laws and obeyed them diligently but it did not give him the kind of joy he experienced when he came to know Jesus. "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3, 8-11).

All the material gains will pass away quickly and the pleasure one gets from it is only momentary. There is only one thing that lasts and that is being with Christ which would give lasting joy. St. Augustine tells this truth in a beautiful prayer,

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

All the suffering Paul endured in his journey with Christ gave him more strength as he knew that each experience brought him closer to Christ. They helped his unending thirst to conform himself to the personality of Jesus. Hence he had no fear or anxiety about his future. The thought that he might be fed to the Lion in front of thousands of spectators gave him not fear but joy that it will take him to Christ in heaven. He did not fear death because he considered it as a means to become one with Christ who offered his life for him. It would help him to be with Christ for all eternity and that was the source of strength for him. That hope, enabled him to go through all the suffering joyfully.

He will try to fulfill the mission, entrusted to him at the gate of Damascus, until his last breath. His life and death will be for carrying out that mission. The Apostle saw the Gentiles to whom he was sent to proclaim the Good News and thus bring them to the Father through Christ, as a great offering or sacrifice. He will reach the Father in heaven. To make that sacrifice acceptable to the Father, he was willing to offer his life with it. “Even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you” (Phil 2, 17).

When sacrificing animals or grains, it was a custom to pour oil on it. The blood of the animal will be sprinkled on the Altar and smeared on the horns of the Altar. That is what is called “Libation” or drink offering. The Apostle was ready to offer his life as a libation to God and he eagerly longed for it. There was no greater offering he could make to God. That offering was done with love, gratitude and humility with the hope that it will be acceptable to God.

This was not only the desire of Paul but it is the model Jesus presented to us. He said that there is no greater love than offering one's life for friends (Jn 15, 13). Sacrificing His only Son, God the Father gave the greatest model of sacrifice: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3, 16). During the last twenty centuries, from the first martyr, Stephen to the present time, hundreds of thousands of Christians have become martyred for Christ. True disciples of Christ find joy in offering everything even one's life for Christ.

For them death is not a loss or end but an offering to Christ who loved us and offered His life for us. Death is the door that would lead us to join Christ forever and thereafter no force would separate us from Christ. It will be the completion of the process of becoming one with the Holy Trinity. Can anyone have a greater joy? It was that hope that guided and motivated Paul all through his life.

This is the hope that guides everyone who believes in Christ. "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3,12-14). This is something that everyone could follow and experience, the lasting peace and happiness. The model of Paul is an inspiration for all the Christians with the recognition that all that we renounce for Christ is not a loss but a gain. May the Lord open our eyes to see this truth!

## 27.

### Rejoice in the Lord

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil 4, 4).

From a human point of view the situation of Paul and of the Church in Philippi was not one that would inspire anyone to rejoice. Paul was writing from the prison and he did not know what would happen to him the next day. He had a strong feeling that he might be fed to the wild beasts in the arena. The faithful in Philippi were undergoing severe persecution on account of their faith. It was a Church Paul loved dearly and they loved him and helped him most.

*The Holy Spirit had brought Paul to Philippi without allowing him to preach anywhere else. “And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the*

gospel to them”(Acts 16,6-10).It was the first place in Europe where Paul preached and established the Church. During the prayer meeting on the banks of the river, he came to know Lydia and her companions and they became close friends of Paul. While Paul and Silas were in Macedonia, he exorcised an evil spirit that possessed a girl, which led to a conflict and the judge ordered Paul to be flogged and imprisoned. But God intervened in a mighty way.

At midnight there was an earth quake that left the prison doors open. The frightened guard asked for forgiveness and received Baptism (Acts 16, 11-40). The next day, Paul and Silas were expelled from the town. This is how the Church in Philippi started. The Christian community of Philippi loved Paul and helped him generously. When he writes to them he opens his heart expressing his feelings of joy and fear, and above all happiness and hope. He explains to them why he was happy: “It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (Phil 1, 20-21).

It was through a vision that Paul came to know Jesus and how much Jesus loved him who tried to wipe out the Christians from the face of the earth (Acts 9, 1-9). But, after the encounter at the gate of Damascus, Paul turned from the persecutor to an ardent follower of Christ to the point that he could say:“It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2, 20). Then he wanted only one thing in his life and that was to be with Christ forever. “I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil 1, 23). He wanted to die so that he could be with Christ.



Once he encountered Jesus, all that he considered as his achievement became meaningless (Phil 3,1-11). He received from Jesus intense joy and peace that no material wealth or position could give him. Hence, he was thoroughly convinced that no power could separate from the love of Christ. That was his source of joy and basis for hope. He was inviting the faithful in Philippi to have such a conviction saying: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice... The Lord is near” (Phil 4, 4-5). Son of God who loves me and offered His life for me was near me, nay is living in me. With this realization no material achievement had any value for him; he was not afraid of anything as he knew that the Lord was with him. The awareness that death was not the end but the beginning of eternal life enabled him to accept any suffering.

“The Lord is near” (Phil 4,5). He has come to lead us into eternal life. We can understand this presence in various ways. It could be seen as His eschatological coming at the end of the history of the world. He comes with the invitation, “...Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...” (Mt 25, 31-35). But this is not the only coming of the Lord Jesus.

We would experience the presence of God each day in various ways. It could happen when we listen to the Word of God; when we receive the Sacraments with due preparation; when we pray with faith. Jesus will reach us through the Holy Spirit and inspire us in the depth of our hearts. He might come to us through the brethren who deserve our help and consideration. We must discern His presence as He is near because He has promised to be with us till the end of time (Mt 28, 20).

Such a faith is the foundation of our happiness. “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made

known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4, 6-7).

We must not stumble over the worldly achievements but move forward with hope in the light of the Word of God, listening to the promptings of the Spirit deep in our hearts. The basic attitude of Christians is not fear and sadness but joy and peace and we need to listen to the words of Paul who said, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil 4, 4).

## 28.

### God who wipes away Tears

*“For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev 7, 15-17).*

The book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, was written in the midst of a great faith crisis. Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81- 96) unleashed a severe persecution against the Christians. As a sign of patriotism the Emperor demanded that every citizen should acknowledge him as god and to proclaim that in public each person must offer incense before his statue and receive a certificate to the effect that the person has worshipped the Emperor.

The Christians who believed in one God could not obey this command. They were faced with the option of either losing their lives to preserve their faith or losing their faith to save their lives. They had to make a decision. Persecution was not new for the Christians as Jesus had warned them about it. They were persecuted first by the Jews and then from the Gentiles. Many lost their lives to safeguard their faith.

In Rome, persecution against Christians was started by Nero who became Emperor at the age of 18, ruled for 14 years and at the age of 32, committed suicide. 18 July the year 64 A.D. at midnight a fire started in the slums on the bank of River Tiberius. For a week it burned in the city of Rome and more than three quarters of the city was reduced to ashes. There was a wild rumor that Nero set fire to the city in order to build a new city he wanted to call Neropolis in his own honor. To save himself from the accusation, he found a scapegoat, the Christians. Through all the available means, he published the lie that it was the Christians who started the fire.

Coupled with this false accusation he proclaimed a new law that being a Christian was a crime deserving capital punishment. He found ever new methods of torture. For the enjoyment of the spectators, the Christians were fed to the wild animals. A great number of Christians were crucified. In his garden he tied the Christians to the lamp posts and trees and burned them like torches. The methods he used were really cruel. But it was limited to Rome and surroundings and the persecution did not last long because there was a civil war in A.D. 68 during which Nero committed suicide and with that the persecution ended.

During the time of Emperor Domitian, the persecution was spread all over the Empire. The provincial rulers of Asia Minor were the most ardent in executing the law and persecuting the Christians. Many Christians lost their property, freedom and life. The persecution continued with no end in sight. Jesus had promised to come back but the Christians did not know when it would happen. The faithful Christians became fearful and desperate and many were ready to abandon their faith.

It was under this situation that the book of Revelation was written, apparently by the beloved disciple of Jesus, apostle John who was exiled to the Island of Pathmos on account of his faith

in Christ. The book was written in the apocalyptic literary form that uses the language of symbols and metaphors. The purpose of the writing was mainly to strengthen the faithful in the midst of persecution, to enable them to stand firm in their faith with hope in Christ, and to assure them that the persecution will soon come to an end. The risen Jesus, who is the Lord of the universe, will come back in glory. Satan and his agents, namely the political leaders now persecuting the Christians, will be punished. Jesus will come and renew everything. It will be a new creation.

The suffering they are encountering now would enable them to participate in the salvific suffering of Christ. God allowed this suffering in order to give them an opportunity to deepen in their faith in Christ. Hence have no fear, do not despair, the sacred author tells the audience. The real ruler of this world is neither the Satan nor the Roman Emperor but God. At present the war between God and Satan, good and evil is going on. At the end, evil would be absolutely defeated and wiped out. Satan and his agents will be thrown into eternal fire. All those who remain faithful to God and His Son in the midst of severe persecution will be rewarded with the gift of eternal life.

An image of that gift is depicted in Chapter seven. "There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne, and around the elders, and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God" (Rev 7, 9-11). They had proven their fidelity to God by suffering the persecution. No more they will have hunger or thirst and no heat or cold would bother them. Jesus, the Lamb of God would lead them to eternal life. He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

This is the picture of the Kingdom of God presented in the book of Revelation. Tears are the signs of pain and sorrow. There will be an end to these tears as there will be no more pain and suffering. The Psalmist had presented this as a prophecy. "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves" (Ps 126, 5-6).

Jesus reminded His disciples many times that if they wished to follow Him, they must be willing to take up their cross (Mt 16,24-26; Lk 9, 57-62; 14, 26-27). During the Last supper, again He warned them, "They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God.... Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy....So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you" (Jn 16, 2-23).

Jesus Christ who would go away physically from the disciples will be present with them through resurrection and glorification. That was the assurance Jesus gave to the disciples. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you" (Jn 14, 18). John and Mathew have not reported the Ascension of Jesus; on the contrary they give emphasis to His presence with the disciples. Mathew concluded the Gospel saying "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28, 20). Jesus had already promised them, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18, 20).

Though Mark has reported the Ascension of Jesus, nevertheless he too gives emphasis to the presence of the Lord in the midst of the disciples. "They went out and proclaimed the

good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it” (Mk 16, 20). From the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles we can see that the disciples experienced the presence of the glorified Christ when they worked together as well as alone. It was Jesus who guided them in their missionary activities and that was their source of strength, consolation, hope and joy. Paul often reminds the churches in his letters from his own experience how God the Father, through Jesus Christ, gives peace and joy to the disciples (2 Cor 1,3-10; Phil 1,27-30; 1 Thess 1,6. 2, 13-16).

Jesus Christ and the Apostles have reminded many times that persecution and suffering will be a part of Christian life. Peter’s instruction deserves special attention, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed” (1 Pt. 4, 12-13). The sign of a Christian is happiness and hope because of the firm faith that Jesus Christ, who defeated death through His death and resurrection, is with them at all times. There will be an end to the suffering in this world and the Lord would take them to eternal happiness. This is the hope of one who follows Christ.

Hence, the Christian is convinced that offering one’s life to Jesus and His Gospel is meaningful. Paul has reminded us that Christians do not live for this world, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15, 19). The glorified Christ “will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself” (Phil 3, 21). “For in hope, we were saved” (Rom 8, 24). This hope will never make us disappointed but give us strength and fill our life of suffering with happiness. It would give us

a life beyond death. We are to be with Christ forever: “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess 4, 17).

We still do not know how that life will be but we are sure of one thing: “We are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 Jn 3, 2). This New Life became a reality with the resurrection of Jesus; it has not been fulfilled in history yet. The Book of Revelation calls it a New Heaven and a New Earth, a New Creation.

“I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away ... And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” (Rev 21, 3-5). This is the source of our hope. Blessed are those who suffer for justice for theirs’ is the Kingdom of God and their tears will be wiped away and they will be filled with joy. May we all receive that Blessing!

