

**SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN THE BIBLE**

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English

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(Scripture)

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INTRODUCTION

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5,24).

Historically Amos is the first prophet to have a book in his name and he is known as the Prophet of Social Justice. However, we can hear the cry for justice not only in the book of Amos but practically in all the books of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

All through the pages of the Bible we can see the anguish of the people who were denied justice and the arrogance of those who denied justice, and hear the shouts of the oppressors and the cries of the oppressed. Above all, the voice of God can be heard reverberating like thunder with flashes like lightning through the words of the Prophets. We can also see the sad end of the oppressors in the course of the various historical events.

Prophet Isaiah, known as the Prophet of holiness, called for an end to injustice. After urging the people to desist from doing injustice, he exhorted them to practice justice and to get reconciled with God. *“Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me... your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them...remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fa-*

therless, plead for the widow... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Is 1, 13-18). A similar message was echoed by Prophet Hosea, the Prophet of love. “So, you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God” (Hos 12, 6).

A contemporary of these three prophets was Prophet Micah. His preaching also was centered on the theme of justice. To the question of a devotee as to what offering he had to make to please God, Micah gave a clear answer. God does not want thousands of holocausts and sacrifices of peace offerings. Neither will God be pleased with the blood of the human beings. What God expects of them is to do justice to the poor. *“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mi 6, 6-8).*

The entire teachings of the Prophets can be summarized in three words: **“Justice, Mercy and Humility”**. Jesus was the fulfillment of all the prophecies. The message contained in his teachings was basically a call for justice, an exhortation to deal with others with kindness and with humility. Through His seven denunciations, He tore apart the mask of hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The fourth denunciation addressed their pretensions in following the letter of the law. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice*

and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (Mt 23, 23).

Social Justice is a prominent theme in the Bible and a detailed study of the subject is envisioned in this book. The word “Justice” has a broader meaning than Social Justice. God desires justice in the relationship between God and man. It is a virtue that a person should have to become acceptable to God. If this were so, then we will have to conclude that “*Social Justice*” does not convey the full depth of the concept “*Justice*”.

We cannot also forget that all relationships, including the relationship with God, is social in nature. Hence justice should be practiced not only in our interpersonal relationships with each other but also in our relationship with God, with the Universe and with our own Self. If this is the right understanding, then it is obvious that the theme of “Social Justice” is central to the Bible.

The theme of Social Justice, which appears in all the 73 books of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, will be discussed following the Canonical order of the books. In the beginning the earth had no shape or form but when it reached the human who was created in the image and likeness of God, there arose sin, injustice, and destruction. The sin of man led to the salvific plan of God. At the end everything will be renewed with the advent of the New Heaven and the New Earth, and with that the creation will reach completion. It is a pilgrimage from Paradise to New Jerusalem. “*According to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*” (2 Pt 3, 13).

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Part I

**Social Justice in the
Old Testament**

1

Man in the Image of God

What is Social Justice? The Romans have given the shortest and the most comprehensive definition, consisting of just two words: “Unicuique suum”. What does it mean? “Giving each one what the person deserves”. The definition stresses the rights and, more especially, the obligations. For someone to get what he deserves, someone else has to give it. The giver has to be just. The giver must have the heart to give. The essence of Social Justice is, therefore, ‘giving what is due to the other’, ‘giving what the other deserves’.

The issue becomes complex if a question is raised as to what is it the other deserves. What are exactly the rights of a person? What are his obligations? Who decides what his rights and obligations should be? Strangely, people who fight for their rights, tend to gloss over their obligations. They are also not open to have their rights challenged.

The practice of Social Justice - the basis of a person’s rights and obligations – is heavily dependent on the attitudes people have towards each other. It may be useful to know our own attitudes first. A few questions will help uncover our own thoughts and feelings: Who am I? Where do I come from? What is my place in society? What is the goal of my life? The answers can be an eye-opener.

Many cultures classified people into different categories. Such cultures exist even today. Some openly discriminate against certain sections of people. We are familiar with the saying: “All men are equal but some are more equal”. These people honestly believe that God Himself has

ordained different categories of people. Call it what we may, 'discrimination' is a part of God's scheme of things. There are whites who believe that people of the black community in Africa are created to be their slaves. In justification, they could even quote from the bible, e.g. Gen 9,25.

The foundation for "Social Justice" is to be found in the Biblical story of the creation of the universe. The first two chapters of the book of Genesis contain the creation story, but the descriptions are somewhat different in the two chapters.

The first description is found in Gen 1,1-2,4a. The narrative had its origins in the priestly tradition, written around the 5th century, after the Babylonian captivity. The creation was executed, so to say, step by step, and at the end, man, the crown of all creation, was brought to life. The act of creation concludes with God's solemn evaluation "*God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good*" (Gen 1, 31).

The second description is found in Gen 2, 4a-25 and it was written during the time of Solomon, around the 10th century B.C., belonging to what is usually called the Yahwist Tradition (J). In this narration, man was created first and the rest of the universe later to serve his needs. In both the narratives, the supremacy of man and his responsibility to the Universe are highlighted. What sort of attitudes people should nurture towards each other is also emphasized. The foundation for Social Justice has been firmly laid down in the creation narration.

Here is what the Scriptures say of man's coming into being. "*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."*" "*So, God created man in his*

own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1, 26-27).

The source of man’s dignity is, without doubt, his relationship with God. Two words “image and likeness” define this relationship. The Hebrew word “*selem*” is translated as ‘image’. Actually, the literal meaning of the word is ‘statue’, ‘idol’ etc. This word was used to refer to the statues erected in the city squares and the idols placed in temples. In short, what is said is that man was created in the likeness of God, a replica of God. To tone it down a little, the Hebrew word “*demuth*”, which means a similar image, is also used. These two words together tell us clearly that God created man and placed him above all the other creatures, and also as His representative on earth.

The second narrative tells how God created an image with dust and how that became alive: “*The LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being*” (Gen 2, 7). Since man was created with the dust, he is closely related to the earth. However, since he carries the breath of God, he transcends the earth. The peculiarity of man is his relationship with God and with the earth. He is mortal and immortal at the same time. The source of man’s dignity is the Divine nature in him.

From these two accounts, we can gather some useful insights about Social Justice:

1) All the people of the earth are created in the image of God and so all possess the dignity that God has bestowed on them. “*You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you*” (Is 43, 4). This assurance applies not only to the people of Israel but to all the people in the world. The glory of God was most evident in Jesus Christ, God Incarnate. The assertion that man was created in the image of God ultimately points to the Son of God who became man in

the person of Jesus Christ. *“He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation” (Col 1, 13-15).* It was in Jesus that the glory of man was manifest in its fullness.

2) Man and woman are created equal even though there are certain differences in their ability and nature. The word “man” includes both man and woman. The original Hebrew term for man is “Adam”. Before it was turned into a name for the first man, the word was used to refer to both man and woman. This has certain implications to our understanding of man and God. Since the people of Israel were a Patriarchal society, there was a tendency to portray God as man. But God created human beings as man and woman. Hence God is also man and woman, Father and Mother. It would, therefore, be wrong to consider woman as someone inferior to man or that the woman has been given to man to lord over.

3) God made no distinctions among the various people. Caste, creed and social status are man’s creations. God does not approve of any discrimination based on birth, profession or any such factor. The tendency to see people on different levels might be the root cause of social divisions and unjust structures.

4) In God’s scheme of things, all human beings are meant to be brothers and sisters. God created them as social beings so that they would help each other in their mutual needs. God did not intend that man should live alone, but willed that he lives as a family, with all the members helping and loving one another. There was a social dimension to the first blessing and command of God. *“God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over*

the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”(Gen 1,28)

This point is made even more forcefully in the second creation narrative. *“Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2, 18).* Discrimination based on color or any such considerations which result in projecting another person as an inferior or an enemy is certainly not willed by God. All such discriminatory practices should be abandoned forthwith if we wish to establish justice in the society. ‘Doing good to all’ should be our sole motto and anyone requiring help should be provided assistance immediately. This is the foremost teaching of Jesus.

Because man is made in the image of God, every person possesses dignity and deserves respect. If we look beyond and beneath all manmade divisions, we shall recognize the Divine image in all men and women. Realization of this truth is the very basis of social justice. Because of the God-given dignity, every person has certain inalienable rights and obligations. This is the second thing to take note of in the creation narrative, to which we turn our attention next.

2

Dominate - Guard

“Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth”. So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen 1, 26-28).

Man was put in charge of the earth and of everything that exists therein. Social Justice concerns the prevailing notion about the ownership of the earth, its products and their distribution. It has been established that all the people have equal rights and obligations. What follows next is man’s relationship to the earth, the other creatures and the products of the earth. *“Take possession and establish dominion”* was God’s own injunction. This should reveal the nature of the relationship adequately. However, the injunction has given rise to many misunderstandings. It is, therefore, necessary to examine its meaning closely and discover what the Bible says on the subject.

To grasp the meaning of the injunction found in the first chapter, we have also to take into account what is said about it in the second chapter. *“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You*

may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2, 15-17).

The command mentioned in the first chapter, “*Take possession, dominate*” is explained in the second chapter. God was asking man to protect the earth and grow products, primarily agricultural. ‘Dominated’ and ‘Subdue’ might give the impression of some kind of a war, like defeating the enemy and turning the people into slaves. In such a case, people might regard the universe as an enemy and try to subdue it as a God-given responsibility. Besides, the winner, as in a war, has every right to use the subdued products whichever way he chooses to.

All this is bound to lead to confusion and misunderstanding. Is it any wonder that the earth was abused and misused! People polluted the earth, air and water. The fertile land changed into desert and the rest of the earth was ruined in one way or other. Most of all, a small minority took possession of the entire land and a vast majority were rendered landless and homeless. Some dared to claim that all this was in accordance with the command of God as narrated in the Bible. All this while, some others alleged that the Church and the Bible are responsible for these abuses. So, it has become absolutely necessary to determine what exactly God expected of man when He commanded him, ‘*dominate and subdue*’ the earth.

The first thing to note is that God gave the authority to subdue the earth, not to an individual or to a particular group, but to humanity as a whole. Therefore, it cannot at all be God’s will that a few monopolize the possession of the land while the majority is landless. This is nothing but injustice of the worst kind. The present situation is actually the consequence of manmade laws. God created the world and all that it contains for the benefit of all. Every living

creature has to find food in the world for its survival (Gen 1, 29-31). The sacred author says that before creating the animals, God first created the sources of food for them so that no creature would have to go without food. A proper grasp of the authority given to man would enable us to recognize God's concern for man and people's responsibility for each other's welfare.

Man is not a despot, accountable to nobody. Rather he is the representative of the invisible God on earth. As such, his actions should reflect God's mercy and care for all creatures. He has to organize matters in such a way that all the people and all the creatures can live and prosper, and their potential can be fully developed. This is how man would partake of the creative work of God. Hence, subjugation does in no way grant man the license to misuse nature or to amass wealth driving the majority into penury. In fact, man's responsibilities are elaborated in the second description of the creation narrative.

God formed man out of dust, breathed life into him and placed him in the Garden to live by growing plants and vegetables. Garden of Eden stands as a symbol of the universe. All that man needed for his life was available in the Garden. But he had to work hard and take care of the Garden. The farmers would understand this language easily. People have to till the land, sow the seed, remove the weeds, provide manure to the plants, protect the produce from wild animals and, when the time is ripe, harvest the fruits. God has entrusted this work to man. Clearly a mother-son relationship can be seen between man and the earth. The earth is the mother who gives all that the man needs. A son is one who takes care of his mother. The earth is not something man can misuse or ill-treat.

Man was living in the Garden of Eden with a matching companion (Gen 2, 18-25). Only with the arrival of

the woman, he became complete. After all, man is a social being, created to live with a companion, loving each other and sharing life together.

When God placed man in the Garden of Eden, He had set a condition. They could eat of all the fruits in the Garden but they were forbidden to eat the fruit of one particular tree. This was a limitation placed on the rights and the power of man. He must live according to the directives of God. Unfortunately, man disobeyed God.

When man breaks the Divine Law, the universe loses its balance. Injustice arises. The people who ate the forbidden fruit instantly lost their freedom. They grew conscious of their nakedness and felt shy and tried to hide from God. Nature became their enemy. Man and woman began to accuse each other for the fault of disobeying God and they became alienated (Gen 3, 1-19). If injustice and violence exist today in the world, it is not because God's blessing is wanting, but because man failed to live according to the directives of God.

God did not give man unconditional authority over the earth. The earth was merely entrusted to his care. The universe belongs to God and people are only its caretakers. *"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me"* (Lev 25, 23). It is this basic law which ensures the rule of social justice. Landless people and gypsies shall not be pushed aside. The fact that a large number of landless people, first enslaved and then driven out, were given a land as their own to stay under the leadership of Joshua shows how important this law is.

Once the Promised Land was divided among the 12 tribes, no tribe was left without land. Every tribe got its share according to the numbers it had among its ranks. However, the tribes were not authorized to sell or to buy

land permanently. This is why Naboth refused to sell his inherited land even though he knew that this could cost him his life (1 Kgs 21). However, gradually this rule was broken with the result most of the land became the property of a few.

When a large number ended up landless, Prophets appeared on the scene and condemned the injustice done to the poor. God inspired Prophet Elijah to meet King Ahab and warn him, *“Thus says the LORD, “Have you killed, and also taken possession?” And you shall say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD: “In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood”* (1 Kgs 21, 19).

God has pronounced judgment on those who amass wealth disregarding His command, through Prophet Isaiah. *“Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant”* (Is 5, 8-9).

Most of the critic and denunciations by the Prophets were against the acts of injustice in the society. Denying justice to the poor was regarded as injustice done to God Himself. The Prophets equated it with idol worship. Such condemnations can be found all through the Bible. The book of Revelation denounces those who neglecting their responsibility accumulate the land for selfish purposes as the ones who destroy the earth: *“The nations raged, but thy wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear thy name, both small and great, and for destroying **the destroyers of the earth**”* (Rev 11, 18).

Time has come to evaluate the prevailing attitudes about land and its produce. There is an urgent need to challenge the man-made boundaries of nations. When we compare populations with the land available for particular nations, we can observe glaring anomalies. Powerful nations have garnered disproportionate amount of land and its produce, employing questionable means like destructive weapons. Our silence, in letting the rich nations grow vastly prosperous at the cost of the poorer nations, would amount to condoning shedding the blood of the likes of Abel and Naboth.

How do we deal with an unjust international economic system that pushes millions into utter poverty? What justification could there be for competition between the rich and the poor nations? Who gives sanction for the promulgation of such discriminatory legislations? A few people end up possessing most of the wealth. The rich nations have no scruples to pollute the air and then they urge the developing countries to grow more forests to clean up the atmosphere. All this they do in the name of fraternity and collaboration! How come nations who cry hoarse about global warming and shrinking O-Zone layers, do not try to control vehicle emission in their own countries? Again, persons, who claim to be supporters of wild life, do not seem to care much about the damage caused to the land and the crops of the poor farmers by the rampaging animals!

God has indeed put man in charge of the earth. But this is not to be construed as unfettered freedom or as a license to misuse nature. The land belongs to man and animals. Neither nations nor individuals can be allowed to own unlimited property while millions have no place even 'to lay their heads'. Our faulty thinking needs immediate correction. Until the situation changes, the cries of the victims of injustice would continue to rend the air and reach the heav-

ens. Time and again the Bible assures us that God responds unfailingly to the cries of the poor and the oppressed (Gen 4, 11-16; Ex 3,7-8; 1 Kgs 21,17-24; Is 5, 7-9; Amos 4,1-3; Jas 5,1-6; Rev. 11,18)

3

Brother – Keeper

“Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” Cain said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4, 9).

Social Justice is a virtue essential for any relationship in society. As the story of Cain and Abel shows, there is a tendency to see the other as an adversary and we try to destroy him, at times even with the use of force. Shockingly, there are ideologies, religious as well, which teach people to regard the others as enemies. Clearly, such an outlook would not at all be conducive to practice of social justice or to maintain peace in the world.

God’s question and the evasive reply of Cain in the Biblical account are pointers to the essence of social justice. Cain took Abel to a faraway location to make sure that no one would be able to see what he was planning to do, and then killed him. What prompted Cain to commit this heinous murder? There are a few hints in the Bible. But before we probe the motive, it may be useful to recall to mind the central Biblical teaching that all the people in the world are brothers and sisters. Neglect of this doctrine of fraternity would be a serious offence and is sure to poison the entire humanity. The dual personality that we find in people had its origin in the Paradise.

The love song Adam sang when he saw the woman for the first time provides evidence of their closeness and intimacy. With great excitement Adam sang, *“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called*

Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen 2, 23). You are mine and I am yours, we are one; God has approved of this union of love. When God created woman from the rib of man, He laid the foundation for this relationship.

But, when man rejected God, the source of life, the relationship between man and woman began to fall apart. When questioned about eating the forbidden fruit, he forgot his love song but pointed to the woman as the temptress and the culprit. Adam said, *“The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen 3, 12).* The incident reveals a fundamental truth. Rejection of God leads to rejection of people. Where natural law is broken, unity would disintegrate and crime and murder, death and disaster would follow automatically.

When we return to the story of Cain, the first thing that comes to our mind is the sacrifice that he offered to God. Cain and Abel were two brothers born of the same parents. Both offered the fruits of their labor as sacrifice to God. Cain being a farmer, offered agricultural products while Abel, a shepherd, offered the fat of the sheep. The sacred author does not mention any problem with the offerings. But God accepted Abel’s offering while rejecting Cain’s. Possibly, this was what gave rise to the enmity between the two brothers. The blame, however, for this turn of events seems to lie with Cain, because God spoke to him accusingly. Seeing Cain angry, God asked him, *“If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen 4, 7).*

God values, not the object offered, but the attitude – the mind and heart - of the one who offers the sacrifice. God’s rebuke provides a hint that Cain harbored ill-will towards Abel even when making the offering. The sacred

author does not explain why Cain held a grudge against his brother but merely says that an offering made with an impure heart will not be acceptable to God.

The one who killed and the one who was killed were brothers and devotees of God. It is shocking that sacrifices offered to God resulted in a murder. Altar leading to crime! Cain's misguided religiosity proved to be his undoing. How could he consider his own brother as an enemy? The original word for religion is 'religio' which means 'to bind together'. Strangely, instead of bringing the two brothers together, their religion drove one against the other. It produced enmity and murder. This is what misguided religiosity does always.

Abel's murder is not to be dismissed as an isolated event that occurred in a distant past, at the dawn of human history. Similar tragedies are taking place even today. We are witnesses to religious fanaticism, ill-conceived and misguided, giving rise to terrorism and ending in bloodshed. We have known of the killing of countless people by the ISI groups in the Middle East just because they chose to embrace a different faith. Even today terrorists like Cain are very much active in the world.

Should God be held responsible for the murder of Cain? Or is religion to be blamed for this heinous crime? There are different viewpoints. Atheistic rationalists, for example, would say that terrorism is an outgrowth of faith and devotion, of a fanatical kind. This may be an oversimplification. If we read the story of Cain carefully, it is clear that religion per se was not responsible for Abel's murder. God does not accept the sacrifice of persons who harbor hatred. Cain's sacrifice was rejected because he was not pure of heart. Sacrifice without practice of social justice will not be acceptable to God. This is the theme that runs across the entire Bible.

“If one sacrifices from what has been wrongfully obtained, the offering is blemished; the gifts of the lawless are not acceptable... Like one who kills a son before his father’s eyes is the man who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor. The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood. To take away a neighbor’s living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood” (Sir 34, 18-22). These warnings demonstrate clearly the importance of brotherly love for the offering to be viewed with favor.

Sacrifices offered without practice of social justice would not be pleasing to God, but might provoke Him to anger instead. The Prophets have voiced this truth in clear terms. *“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps, I will not listen”* (Is 1, 13-15; Amos 5, 21-23). Jesus has instructed us that we have to first make peace with the people in our lives before offering the sacrifice. *“So, if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift”* (Mt 5, 23-24).

When people take up arms in the name of religion and faith, they should first figure out which God they are trying to please or protect. Delphi was a place of worship in ancient Greece, dedicated to God Apollo. The incumbent oracle once warned that there would soon be an attack by the enemy. When the priests hastened to take the statue to a safer place, another announcement was heard, which said, *“Apollo will take care of himself, you try to save your life”*. Accordingly, all the people escaped into the moun-

tain. When the enemy came to attack, the earth shook and big rocks rolled down from the mountain, and destroyed the enemy's army. This might just be a story but the intended lesson is that humans do not have to fight with each other to protect their God. God is not a God of discord and enmity but of love and unity. This is what we learn from the story of Cain and Abel.

After leaving the altar, Cain killed his brother. But God avenged the blood of Abel. Cain was wrong to assume that nobody would have seen him murder his brother. God sees all that we do and He knows the innermost thoughts of our hearts. God asked Cain, *“What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you, its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth”* (Gen 4, 10-12).

The God of the Bible is one who responds to the cry of the poor and the innocent, the oppressed and the persecuted, regardless of their caste and creed. God heard the cry of the slaves from the field where the bricks were made. God punished the Egyptians who persecuted them (Ex 3, 7-8; 12, 29-36; 14, 24-25). When Israel became an Empire, God came down to punish the rulers who had ill-treated the people (Is 5). However, the story of Cain carries a different lesson. Punishment of God is not punishment, but a corrective measure to lead people to change and to conversion.

When Cain, on hearing God's punishment for murdering his brother, was in a state of despair, God instantly assured him protection. *“My punishment is greater than I can bear.... and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will slay me. Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! If anyone slays Cain, vengeance shall*

be taken on him sevenfold". And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him" (Gen 4, 13-15).

Will this protection be misunderstood? By placing the seal on Cain, was God giving him sanction to continue his unholy ways? Not at all! Indeed, the offer of protection reveals the true nature of God's justice and His bountiful mercy. God desires not the death of the sinner but his conversion (Ez 33, 11). Cain has not been given license to kill, but he is being made to realize his mistake and to atone for his sins by becoming a protector of people. While so doing, he would have to carry the weight of his punishment.

Death or murder is never a solution to any problem. Justice will not be restored by killing the murderer. Rather, empathy, kindness, compassion and promotion of brotherhood would give rise to a new world, a kingdom of justice. This is the message behind the protection offered to Cain.

In fact, the Bible envisions the story of humanity to be a story of brotherly love and care, founded on the relationship between God and man. Concern for each other is the true religiosity. We have been created in the image of God so that we would love one another and live as a family. All those we meet in our path of life are to be regarded as brothers and sisters, deserving of our love and care.

To the question God had raised, "*Where is Abel, your brother?*" Cain responded: "*I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?*" (Gen 4, 6). It was a lie. It betrayed arrogance. God nailed his lie and made him know that his crime could not be erased easily. There is never a justification for any killing or persecution, especially in the name of religion. Social justice will be a reality only if we accept that God is our Father and we are all brothers and sisters to one another.

Cain protested that he was not his brother's keeper. This is the very opposite of what is affirmed in the Salvation history. Fearing that the conflict among their servants might affect their own relationship adversely, Abraham said to Lot, "*Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen; for we are brothers*" (Gen 13, 8). Brotherly attitude is a must for promoting peace in the society. "**Do not fight, we are brothers**". This will also serve as the foundation for Social Justice. Bible contains many examples of people with such a mindset.

Ismail and Isaac had been separated but they came together later to bury their father (Gen 25, 8). Jacob deceived his elder brother Esau and also his father Isaac, and obtained the blessing. Esau his elder brother had first vowed to kill Jacob, but years later when they met, they forgot their enmity and embraced each other (Gen 27, 41; 33, 4). Joseph's brothers had planned to kill him but at the end they just sold him as a slave. Years later, when they stood in front of him, fearing and trembling, Joseph declared his forgiveness and told them that whatever happened was part of God's plan to send him to Egypt ahead of them, in order protect countless people from starvation (Gen 45, 4-5).

The people of Israel were a great community as they were the descendants of the 12 tribes which originated from the 12 brothers. They were expected to care for and protect each other. Jesus too taught his disciples that they must love one another as He had loved them. In the early Christian community, leadership was not regarded as a position of honor but as a responsibility to promote love and respect among the people. The Church of Jesus is a community in which all the people of the world can be members. Jesus said to them, "*You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren*" (Mt 23, 8).

Jesus declared that when something was done to the least in the society, it was as though it was done to Him. This means that Jesus would approach us in the form of the poor and the needy. *“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... And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? ... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me”* (Mt 25, 35-40).

This teaching is central to all true religions. There is an ancient Hindu saying that guest is God and by serving the guest, we are serving God. Hence, the religion that does not encourage such an attitude of brotherly love is not genuine. They aim at their personal gains. St. Paul criticized their attitude unveiling their selfish motive, “their god is the belly” (Phil 3, 10; Rom 16, 18). Social Justice will be thriving where people regard each other as brothers and deal with others with love and respect. This is the plan God has for the people He created.

4

Scattering Towers

“Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly”. And they had bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; ... Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech” (Gen 11, 3-7).

The Tower of Babel is the last incident recorded as part of the Primeval History (Genesis 1-11). The story contains important lessons about Social Justice. Building the Tower of Babel was an exercise in futility. In the narration of this incident, the sacred author seems to have been influenced by the Tower of the Temple of Marduk.

There were stepped pyramids in Mesopotamia, called Ziggurat, built as temples of Marduk. The place for worship was on the top floor, which was considered as the place where God and man meet as the priests go up with the offering and Marduk would come down to accept it and shower his blessings. The sacred author might have had this tower in mind when he wrote about the Tower of Babel. This background can help us to understand the dream of Jacob in which he saw a ladder reaching up to heaven. Jesus too had spoken of heaven as a place where man meets with God. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and*

descending upon the Son of man” (Jn 1, 51). If tower is a holy place where God meets man, what is the problem with the Tower of Babel? Why is it perceived as an act of negation of God? To find the answers, we require a careful study of the narration and an analysis of the motives behind the construction of the city.

“Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11,4). What the people desired was a city and a tower to broadcast their fame. The tower must reach up to the heaven. Why? To understand it, we have to be familiar with the world picture they had at that time. The earth was thought to be flat, like a board. The sky is a vault over the earth like a gigantic tent resting on the huge mountains. Above the sky there is water and above the water the heaven, the throne of God (Ps 104, 2-3).

In this perspective, the tower that reaches the heavens was something special. On the top of the high tower, men would be able to reach the throne of God. If they do, they would turn Divine, and they would become equal to God. It is clear the tower signifies, at least indirectly, the human pride of declaring oneself as god that in reality is the negation of God Almighty. The Tower of Babel is another version of the temptation that our first parents faced in the Paradise. Satan had promised them that they would become like God if they would eat the forbidden fruit. The attraction in both temptations was the same: Man can become like God. Evidently, the attempt at building a city and a tower was an expression of an open rebellion against God or rather the self-deification of man.

“Let us make a name for ourselves”. The literal translation of the original Hebrew word used is, “to become famous, to become the first”. Their desire to remain together

in one place was also not in line with the expressed Will of God. For God had commanded them, *“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”* (Gen 1, 28).

But far more insidious was their plan to make a name for themselves. The construction of the tower was an attempt at fulfilling their ambition to become like God. They had actually been mandated to fill the earth and to serve as God’s representatives on earth. But they had deviated from the task given to them to pursue a different goal. Their attempt, though, proved futile. *“The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built”* (Gen 11, 5). They had hoped that the tower they were building would reach the heaven, but in reality, God had to come down to see it.

Their attempt failed, or else there would have been grave consequences. God said to Himself, *“This is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech”. So, the LORD scattered them from there over the face of all the earth and they abandoned building the city. “Therefore, its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth”* (Gen 11, 6-9). This is said in a story form but does it mean that God was afraid or jealous of having an equal to compete with? More than afraid of losing His position, God was concerned about the disaster man would bring down on himself by trying to become equal to God.

The sacred author has portrayed the city and the tower

reaching to the heavens as signs of man's pride. Bible has repeatedly warned that God would scatter the proud (2 Sam 22,28; Jer 13, 9; Lk 1, 51). That God is the ultimate cause of all that happens in the world is reflected in all these narratives. However, the incident of people getting scattered all over the world was a consequence of their own actions.

Until 1989 when the Berlin wall crumbled and Soviet Union broke into many nations, the world stood divided between two super powers. When one of them disintegrated, people thought there would be lasting peace in the world. However, the war in Kuwait shattered all such hopes. When a single nation tries to dominate the whole world, there cannot be lasting peace or unity on earth.

Every nation strives to be the first and the greatest on earth. This is a permanent temptation. But the fact is, only one, whether a nation or an individual, can be the first or the greatest. Truly speaking, there is only One who is the first and the greatest, God. Being with Him and living according to His will is the source of all greatness. Only when this is realized, we would recognize the futility of trying to be the first and the greatest in the world.

Church is a place where people gather to worship. It should be conducive for prayer. There is no necessity whatsoever that the church should have the highest steeple in the world or the tallest bell tower in Asia for the prayers to be heard. Do we think we are glorifying God by placing big advertisement boards on the way to the church with claims of having won an entry into the Guinness book of records?

When the people in power govern with the sole aim of earning name and fame, the sacred rituals and devotions will not be acceptable to God. What is offered to God - money or other gifts - belong to the poorest in the society. Jesus might have had them in mind, when He proclaimed,

“Blessed are you poor”. It would be unjust if the money collected for the poor is utilized for celebrations and building towers. Jesus was born in a manger, after having been denied a place in the inn. He identified Himself with the poorest of the poor in the society. But if a huge amount is spent to put up the most beautiful crib in the region, and this becomes a matter of competition, the organizers are clearly trying to build Towers of Babel.

When the ancient people, forgetting God and challenging His position, tried to build the Tower of Babel, they would not have expected that God would come down and scatter them around the earth or that their behavior would be made a synonym for foolishness. The Temple, modified by Herod the Great, was big and beautiful and was found worthy to be included in the list of the greatest wonders of the world. Looking at this great edifice, the disciples of Jesus were eloquent in their admiration for its splendor and beauty. *“As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” And Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down”* (Mk 13, 1-2). This prophecy was fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Romans burned down the Temple as it was the last stronghold of the Jewish rebels.

Money, earmarked for meeting the primary needs of people, is sometimes misused for erecting towers to serve the vanity of a few. The events surrounding the Tower of Babel sound a warning against such misuse of funds. Those promoting projects of vanity need to ponder what message they are conveying to the world. What a scandal it is to splurge precious money on pompous celebrations even if they were meant to honor saints!

The senselessness of constructing mighty buildings and

of lavish spending on celebrations cannot be overlooked. We might have seen an advertisement which reads: “Owner’s pride, Neighbor’s jealousy”. The jealous neighbor is bound to come up with bigger structures to score a point. If this is precluded, envy may give way to alienation, and alienation to enmity, leading to undesirable consequences. It is an indisputable fact that religious fanaticism and atrocities have their origins in jealousy triggered by towers such as the Tower of Babel.

Driving out a Bishop who erected a luxury palace and forcing his successor Bishop to sell it are signs of the growing social awareness in the church. Celebrations and festivities, not in line with the values of the Gospels, should be stopped once and for all. How many more towers will have to be brought down before we open our eyes to our skewed priorities? Looking at the society of his day St Paul lamented: “*Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things*” (Phil 3, 19). Looking at our own society today would he not reproach us in a similar manner?

5

The Way of the Lord

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

Abraham, whom the Bible portrays as the Father of Believers, is a very important character in the initial period of the Salvation History. God’s plan was to make salvation available to all the people of the world. Gen 18, 19 tells how God would carry out His plan. This is a decisive teaching about Social Justice in the Bible.

For the promise made by God to Abraham to be fulfilled, his children would have to live according to the Word of God, practicing righteousness and justice. This is possible only if Abraham himself first obeys God’s Commandments and teaches them to his children through his words and deeds. Three points, namely, way of the Lord, justice and righteousness, stand out in the soliloquy of the Lord. However, before we analyze these concepts in detail, it would be helpful to understand the context in which this soliloquy is set. “Understand the text in its context” is an important law of biblical hermeneutics.

Sin began with Adam and grew through Cain who harbored hatred for his brother. But soon sin abounded and burst all the limits and it became impossible for man to live on earth. The sixth chapter of the book of Genesis has this to say. *“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man*

was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen 6, 5-6). This is a far cry from the initial statement of God, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good (Gen 1, 31).

It was with deep sorrow that God decided to destroy humanity. Man had strayed away from God to such an extent that return to God seemed well-nigh impossible. Needless to mention, that human feelings attributed to God are not to be taken literally. The point made is that wickedness of man seeped in injustice is certain to invite total destruction. Even when decision had been made to destroy the entire humanity, God spared a man and his family who had lived according to the commandments of God. *“Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God” (Gen 6, 8-9).*

While wiping out a generation living under the influence of sin, God raised a new generation through a just man. Noah, the just man, was not only the grandfather of Abraham but was also a symbol and forerunner of a new creation. The new creation continued through Abraham. Abraham too had to walk in the ways of the Lord as Noah did. However, one of the sons of Noah, Ham, had turned into a vile character. God cautioned that the children of Abraham must not fall into such evil ways.

Noah was just and walked in the ways of the Lord, but inexplicably his life fell apart after the flood. One day he was very drunk and was lying in the Tent without clothes. This led his youngest son Ham to commit a sin and inherit a curse for his future generations (Gen 9, 20-25).

The descendants of Noah wallowed in sin. Their am-

bition to become like God by building a tower that would reach up to heaven resulted in their getting scattered all over the world. By the first sin, humanity lost the Paradise. By attempting to build a great tower, they were left confused and scattered. Their pride brought on them all this misery (Gen 11, 1-9). However, it was from this society which lacked understanding and acceptance, that God chose Abraham, the son of Terah, and started a new community. It marked the beginning of a new era, the history of Salvation for humanity.

The cry against the city of Sodom was great and their sin extremely heinous. God told Abraham about the punishment that would befall Sodom and Gomorrah, *“Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know”* (Gen 18, 20-21). Grave sin would invite a proportionately grave punishment. The Divine visit would lay bare the truth of the matter. If they were indeed guilty, their destruction would be inevitable. God decided to make this known to Abraham. The sacred author projects human feelings unto God in the form of a story. The message conveyed through the incident is of great significance. To understand it, one has to know what the sin of Sodom was and the punishment inflicted on the city.

There is a general consensus that the sin of Sodom was homosexual indulgence and that is how the word “sodomy” has come to be used as a synonym for homosexuality. There is enough evidence in the Biblical account to warrant this conclusion. The two angels who arrived to investigate the situation accepted Lot’s hospitality and stayed with him for the night. Some men, though, came at night to Lot’s place and demanded that the two visitors be sent

out, so that they could be used for their sexual pleasures. That unnatural sexual indulgence was the sin of Sodom is beyond any doubt. But whether this alone was responsible for incurring the wrath of God and the total annihilation of the city is not certain.

Bible speaks about Sodom in several places. Jesus refers to Sodom as an example of a city getting punished for sins committed (Mt 10, 15; 11, 23-24; Lk 17, 29). What was the sin committed by the people of Sodom? St. Peter goes to say that they lived with no fear of God. *“By turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction and made them an example to those who were to be ungodly”* (2 Pt 2, 6). But St. Jude offers a different explanation. *“Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire”* (Jude 1,7). The book of Revelation refers to Rome as Sodom because Rome had become an embodiment of evil. *“The great city which is allegorically called Sodom”* (Rev. 11, 8). However, in the opinion of the Prophets, sin of Sodom could not have been solely sexual aberration.

Prophet Isaiah starts his book with a critical evaluation of the society. The prophet, after a brief mention of the society, goes on to list all its wrongdoings. *“The vision of Isaiah the son of Amos, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.... Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged”* (Is 1, 1-4). In the accusations the Prophet makes, there is no mention of any sexual offence but rather infringements of social justice.

Worship of God without practice of justice will be an affront to the Lord. To reconcile with the Lord, we have to first ensure that justice is extended to the poor and the needy. *“Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ‘What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats... I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them”* (Is 1, 10-14). The Prophet announced what would happen to the society if they fail to act justly. *“If you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken”* (Is 1, 20).

Prophet Ezekiel, speaking to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon, compares Judah to Sodom and then catalogues a list of their inequities. He accuses them of not only ignoring the needy but also of exploiting them. *“Your younger sister, who lived to the south of you, is Sodom with her daughters. Yet you were not content to walk in their ways, or do according to their abominations; within a very little time you were more corrupt than they in all your ways. As I live, says the Lord GOD, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy”* (Ez 16, 46-49). At night the Angels came to visit the city. They were given hospitality not by the people of Sodom but Lot, a foreigner who had come and settled there. In short, injustice, in a broad sense, was the sin of Sodom as they failed to help the poor and the needy.

From the analysis of the context one thing becomes clear. God did not want Abraham and his children to go through the sort of punishment that Sodom and Gomorrah had suffered. To escape from punishment, Abraham would have to walk through the ways of the Lord and teach his descendants to do likewise. The example of Sodom and Gomorrah is a powerful lesson about behaviors to be avoided. Learning from their example, Abraham and his children should walk the path of justice and help the poor and the needy; something the Sodomites had failed to do. Only then will the promises given to Abraham be fulfilled.

“Act justly and have a care for the brethren in need”. What is implied in the injunction is: “Walk in the ways of the Lord”. The precept is an exhortation to live according to the will of God. Abraham and his descendants were chosen as the People of God. God had a definite plan for them, the kind of life they were to lead. He taught them what to do and what not to do. The Ten Commandments (Ex 20,1-17) represent the Will of God in a capsule form. The Commandments are explained in detail in the succeeding chapters of the Bible (Ex 21-23; Lev 17-26; Dt 12 - 26).

Those who participated in the Covenant are obliged to observe the precepts of the Covenant. However, adherence to the precepts should be out of conviction and not out of compulsion. *“See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you this day, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it.... loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to*

Jacob, to give them” (Dt 30,15-20). People were left free to choose what they wanted but God willed that they chose life and goodness, and not death and evil.

Two words are important in reference to Social Justice. They are ‘love’ and ‘justice’. The original Hebrew words are “*sedaqa*” and “*mishpath*”. The “Way of the Lord” seems to be an apt description of these two words. But let us consider what these two words truly imply.

‘Just’ and ‘Just man’ (in Hebrew *Sedaqa- Saddiq*) denote a life that would please God. The devotee raises a query as to who could be worthy to live in the house of God. Psalm 15 provides the needed response. ‘Do only justice and live a blameless life’. The Psalmist goes on to dwell on the qualities of a just person. “*He who walks blamelessly, and does what is right, and speaks truth from his heart; who does not slander with his tongue, and does no evil to his friend, nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor; in whose eyes a reprobate is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change; who does not put out his money at interest, and does not take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved”* (Ps 15, 2-5). Importance is shown to mutual relationships among people.

The Hebrew word “*mishpath*” is rendered as ‘justice’ in English. This word is derived from the verb form “*shaphath*” which means ‘judge’ or ‘execute judgment’. There could be situations when justice is not done and hence, there should be arrangements to re-establish justice. In the Bible such arrangements are called the “City Gate”,

When the society had a tribal set up, it was the chief of the tribe who heard the complaints and administered justice to those who had been denied justice. With the advent of monarchy, the king or the one appointed by the king

handled this responsibility. When corrupt judges decreed in favor of the one who had paid bribe, the prophets re-proved them (Am 5,12; 6,12; Jer 6, 13-14; Ez 22, 12-25) (The teachings of the prophets on justice will be discussed in subsequent chapters). Rectification of the situation involving violations of justice is implied in the word, “mish-path”. It could be rendered as a “Just Judgment” because there had been several cases of unfair judgment.

The lesson from the soliloquy of God regarding the mission of Abraham is plain and simple. God chose and commanded Abraham to live according to the will of God and to teach his descendants to do likewise. Gradually, the will of God was revealed through the precepts of the Covenant. People, aspiring to live in peace, had to obey the Ten Commandments.

The relationship among the people is guided by conscience. Conscience is formed by the commitment to the laws, derived from the precepts of the Covenant, namely the Ten Commandments. The basis of the Ten Commandments is the relationship between God and man. The laws attach much importance to the relationship among the individuals as well. If Abraham and his descendants live faithfully according to the laws, all the people will be blessed by God. Should they fail to do so, they will meet with the same fate as Sodom and Gomorrah.

6

Blind Zeal

“Bring her out, and let her be burned” (Gen 38, 24).

A terrible judgment was pronounced by Judah, son of Jacob and an ancestor of the Messiah, on Tamar, his daughter-in-law. The provocation was that she had become pregnant by harlotry. Judah was furious. We may wonder why this story is mentioned here. What lessons about social justice could there be in this narrative about the fury of Judah and the judgment he pronounced. A close look will reveal the important lessons lying hidden.

That the sacred author regards this incident very seriously is gauged from the fact he has devoted an entire chapter to the story – Genesis 38.

Away from his father and brothers, Judah settled among the Canaanites and married a Canaanite woman. She bore him three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah. When Er grew up, he married a Canaanite woman named Tamar. Er died without any children, and so Onan, the second son, took Tamar as his wife. The second son also died without children. Fearing that the same fate might befall the third son Shelah, Judah sent Tamar away to her ancestral home with the promise that she would be brought back when Shelah was old enough for marriage. Until then she was to remain in her father’s house as a widow.

The incident is reported to have taken place during the Patriarchal period. Though the laws might not have been framed precisely about that time, there existed a custom

called levirate marriage, among the people of Israel, which prescribed that if someone died without children, his brother should marry the widow and beget children for him. The first child born would be considered as the heir of the deceased brother. This was the law contained in the book of Deuteronomy (25, 5-10). Further, the law had prescribed the punishment and also a solution for any failure in fulfilling this duty.

According to this law, Judah was obliged to give his third son, Shelah as husband to Tamar. He did not do so. Nor did he allow her to live according to the customs of her own people. She was forced to live like a widow in her father's house as per the Jewish law, without being provided with adequate care and protection. Tamar was forced to live by laws which were totally alien to her.

The sacred author makes mention of the reasons behind the death of the two sons of Judah. Er died on account of his own wicked ways. The second son Onan died because of an entirely different reason. He knew that the child born to Tamar would not be his and so he purposely spilled the sperm on the floor. From this act of birth prevention, the word "*Onanism*" was born. The sacred author states that Onan sinned by this action and God punished him with immediate death. Both the sons of Judah died because of their own faults but it was Tamar who had to suffer the consequences.

The sacred author goes on to relate the incident that led to Judah passing judgment on Tamar. After his wife died, Judah observed the days of grief as prescribed by Jewish tradition. Once this was done, he decided to go to Timnah to shear his sheep. Tamar came to know that her Father-in-law was traveling to Timnah. She acted quickly. Judah, as he was journeying, saw a prostitute sitting by the wayside. He approached her and sought her company. As her face

was covered, he did not know who it was. Since he did not have any money to pay her, she asked him to give her his signet, his cord, and the staff that he had in his hand. Without a second thought Judah gave them all to her. He had no idea that it was his daughter-in-law Tamar who had played the harlot with him.

Days later, Judah sent a servant with a sheep to Tamar to regain his pledged goods. However, by then Tamar had returned home. She got rid of the dress of the harlot and put on her own clothes of a widow. The servant came back and reported that no prostitute was found sitting by the way side. Judah did not think any more about it. In fact, he felt good that he did not get any bad name for not paying the harlot. He seems to be of the view that there is nothing wrong in associating with a prostitute so long as the agreed amount is paid. But yet he decreed that Tamar, his daughter-in-law, was to be burnt for engaging in harlotry.

This is what transpired. Three months after he had travelled to Timnah, Judah heard that his daughter-in law was pregnant. He was furious. He pronounced judgment that she should be dragged out and burnt.

“About three months later Judah was told, “Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; and moreover, she is with child by harlotry”. And Judah said, “Bring her out, and let her be burned”. As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, “By the man to whom these belong, I am with child”. And she said, “Mark, I pray you, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff”. Then Judah acknowledged them and said, “She is more righteous than I, in as much as I did not give her to my son Shelah. And he did not lie with her again” (Gen 38, 24-26). How easily the matter got closed! Nobody questioned why different standards were being applied, one for man and a different standard for a woman!

The world had to wait for almost 2000 years for someone to come to expose this double standard. He was a descendant of Judah. He challenged those who had gathered, “*Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her*” (Jn 8, 7). His inspiration might have originated from the incident that condemned Tamar to die by the judgment of a Tribal leader. This was no accident but a plan of God to expose the contradictions present in human laws and thoughts.

Tamar had just one thing to say to those who came to execute the punishment. “*Ask Judah to whom this signet, cord and staff belong. The owner of these things is the father of the child in my womb*”. The very person who condemned her to death for harlotry had impregnated her. Tamar’s plea carries deep implications. What a travesty of justice that those who are appointed to enforce the laws and to take disciplinary actions for violations, themselves break the laws! Is any important lesson contained in this incident? However, before discussing the relevance of this event for our times, it is necessary to consider Judah’s response to the entire situation.

When Judah was confronted with the things he had pledged, he instantly confessed his guilt. He recognized the wisdom in the actions of Tamar. Judah said, “*She is more righteous than I, in as much as I did not give her to my son Shelah*” (Gen 38, 26). By praising Tamar, Judah in a way laid down very different yardsticks for deciding what is just and what is not. He conceded that Tamar had acted like a harlot only to ensure the continuation of life, which was in fact the chief aim of justice.

At a time when there was no concept of life after death, the prevailing belief was that a person’s life was continued through the children. If a person died without an heir, his existence would cease forever. When the Jews settled in

the Promised Land, Joshua divided the land among the 12 tribes and families of Israel. No one was left without a piece of land of his own. When a person dies, his children inherit his land and he continues to live through his children. Later his children will be buried with him in the same tomb, so that the family remains together through generations in the Promised Land. This way, he ensures his perpetuation in the Promised Land. On the other hand, not owning a land in the Promised Land almost amounted to being separated from God. It is no surprise; there was a law which forbade transfer of land from one tribe to another, safeguarding the rights of all the tribes.

It is from this angle that the responsibility of begetting children for the dead brother who died without an heir has to be viewed. Tamar took a great risk in doing what she did, and she did it not only for her own sake but for the sake of Judah and his family. God protected her and blessed her by granting her an honorable place in the Salvation History. Of the twins born to her from her relationship with Judah, one of them, Perez, became a link in the genealogy of the Messiah. Tamar is named first among the four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus.

The hypocrisy of pretending to be devoted to the observance of Law while not practicing justice and mercy is apparent in the judgment Judah pronounces on Tamar. Perverted religiosity is also seen in the incident involving the fallen woman who was brought to Jesus. The Jewish leaders demanded that Jesus should pronounce his judgment on her, bearing in mind that according to their Law, such a woman had to be stoned to death (Jn 8, 1-11). The Pharisee who viewed with condescension the sinful woman who ran into the banquet hall and shed tears at the feet of Jesus was also guilty of such hypocrisy. In the book of Daniel (Ch. 13) we see the ugly face of judges who accused Susanna of adultery and condemned her to be stoned to death because

she refused to surrender to their lust. All these incidents are indicative of the distorted religiosity and hypocrisy of religious leaders.

We still see numerous people, who have no sense of justice, but pretend to be holy, hide their transgressions and act with arrogance, like the Pharisees of old. There are terrorists and religious fanatics who do not hesitate to eliminate anyone who follows a religion different from theirs. In every religion we see hypocritical mindset which professes, “I am holy but all the others are sinners” (Lk 18, 9-14). There are political leaders who falsely accuse opponents belonging to a rival party of wrongdoings and have them eliminated in Godfather style. Will they be able to hide their face from the gaze of God? In which sea or river on earth can they wash away the blood in their hands? They have to stand trial some day for their acts of injustice in the court of God.

What do we say of an officer who takes crores as bribe but has no qualms in ordering an investigation about a person accused of taking a few rupees as bribe? The senior leaders manage to rise high in positions by getting risky assignments carried out by junior personnel. When things get exposed, it is the junior people who are made the scapegoats. The actual kingpins of the crimes would plainly deny any involvement in the wrongdoing. Won't it be proper and desirable if they had at least the integrity that Judah had, to admit their guilt? When Judah realized that Tamar had become pregnant by him, he withdrew his judgment which carried the verdict of death by being burned alive. He confessed and said that “She is more righteous than I”, because he knew that he had denied justice to her by not giving her his youngest son as her husband. Jesus said, *“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment, you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get”* (Mt 7, 1-2).

7

Forgiving love

“Joseph said to them, “Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones”. Thus, Joseph reassured them and comforted them” (Gen 50, 19-21).

Joseph spoke these words to his brothers who were afraid that he might avenge them after their father’s death. Many principles about Social Justice lie buried in this episode. To begin with, revenge is no solution. Only forgiving love could help uphold justice and promote brotherhood.

Joseph had not forgotten the atrocities his brothers had heaped upon him. Out of jealousy, they had originally planned to kill him, but luckily, later they decided to sell him as a slave (Gen 37, 45). Joseph, however, could see the hand of God in all that had happened. Everything turned out to be a blessing. Joseph forgave his brothers and was magnanimous in speaking to them, *“Come near to me, I pray you”*. *And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life”* (Gen 45, 4-5). All through the Bible the dominant theme is that of forgiving love.

The first murder in the world occurred due to jealousy and hatred. Cain had disregarded the warning of God about the sin crouching at his door step to devour him. He

did not consider Abel as his brother. Instead of getting reconciled with him, he resolved to kill him as though that would solve the problem. It turned out to be a disaster. The murder landed him in a bigger turmoil. He was seized by deep fear. He cried out saying, *“My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me this day away from the ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me. Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! If anyone slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold”. And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him”* (Gen 4, 13-15).

The seven-fold vengeance did not lead to peace and justice but actually escalated the crime rate seventy-seven-fold by the fifth generation. The enmity grew to such levels that the people began to regard vengeance as a sign of courage. The song of Lamech about revenge betrays the attitude of the people. *“Lamech said to his wives: Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, hearken to what I say: I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-seven-fold”* (Gen 4, 23-24). Such behavior angered God. He decided to destroy the world with a great flood.

After the flood God made a cosmic Covenant with the whole creation. Unfortunately, revenge came to be viewed as a solution for wrongs suffered. This resulted in a bloody history for humanity. *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image”* (Gen 9, 6). Even today we see bloodshed in our streets, and, at times, in our churches as well. People seem living their lives and engaging in actions influenced by the philosophy of revenge.

God liberated the people of Israel from the slavery

in Egypt and accepted them as His own people through a Covenant at Mount Sinai. God did not want them to be enslaved again by anybody. But in the precepts of the Covenant, there were provisions for exacting revenge for injustice suffered. *“If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe”* (Ex 21, 23-25; Lev 24,19-21; Dt 19, 21). If this law were to be enforced strictly, we shall soon be seeing numerous people moving around without eyes, teeth, hands and legs.

Several more examples can be cited from the Old Testament to show how an attitude of revenge has proved disastrous. Samson was a person chosen by God to save Israel. His parents had made careful preparations for his birth. They observed all the laws and taught their son to live likewise. But Samson did not care much about any of the laws. He only kept his hair uncut from birth as a sign of his pledge to be a Nazirite to God. But finally, when he lost everything, he turned to God and prayed for strength to avenge the people who had cheated him. *“O Lord GOD, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be avenged upon the Philistines for one of my two eyes”* (Jgs 16, 28). His prayer was answered. More than 3000 Philistines assembled in the Temple of Dagon were killed with him when Samson brought down the structure with his extraordinary strength.

Relying on a vision he had Samuel anointed Saul, son of a farmer, as the first king of Israel. Saul became jealous of his bodyguard David. Gradually jealousy turned into fear and hatred so much so that Saul wanted to kill David. Forgetting his mission to protect his people from enemies, he went hunting for David. All his attention was turned on eliminating David. But unfortunately when Saul, defeated by the Philistines, took his own life the hills of Gilboa, Israel lost not only their king but also their freedom. In later

years, David killed his own soldier, Uriah to hide his adultery and to save his name. In the process, he destroyed the unity of Israel and the unity of his family. David's son, in turn, misused his sister and the children killed each other. The kingdom was rife with conflicts and divisions.

Violence begets violence. The law of revenge was designed to limit violence and to warn that those who harm others would have to face retaliation. The crowded prisons are a proof that fear of punishment has not worked as a deterrent. The bloodshed on the roads and the frequent cry for help prove that revenge is not an effective tool to establish justice.

We can now appreciate the relevance of Christ's teachings, totally different and revolutionary in nature. *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also... Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you... But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"* (Mt 5, 38-45). This precept of love is part of the "Sermon on the mount". Justice is safeguarded not by revenge but by forgiving love. It is not enough that we refrain from hurting the neighbor but we should get reconciled as early as possible, either by granting or by seeking forgiveness (Mt 5, 21-26).

The path of justice that Jesus has taught us is based on forgiving love. Only if one is prepared to love even the enemy, one can become a disciple of Jesus Christ. The Gentiles would love those who love them and hate those who hate them. The Pharisees insisted on observing the letter of the law. But Jesus saw no merit in such an attitude

(Mt 4, 43-48). Jesus's teachings stand above all the laws in existence. In fact, He taught us laws which never existed until that time.

Jesus held out as a model none other than God the Father Himself, the Almighty God. He commanded that all the people should act like the Father who makes the sun shine and the rains fall on the good and the wicked. "*You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Mt 5, 48). In what way can a man, who is weak and sinful, be perfect as the heavenly Father? Luke has given us the guidance. "*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful*" (Lk 6, 36). Mercy is the summit of love. A spirit of compassion and tolerance would enable us to be sensitive to the needs of others and understand their constraints, so to accept them as they are.

To make the sacrifice acceptable to God, one has to get reconciled with his brother first. "*If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift*" (Mt 5, 23-24). You must forgive your brother (Mk 11, 25-26). Quoting the teaching of the Pharisees Peter asked Jesus regarding the measure of forgiveness. "*Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?*" Jesus said to him, "*I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven*" (Mt 18, 21-22). Here Jesus reversed, so to say, the pronouncement of Lamech avenging seventy-seven-fold. What does this mean?

Throughout his life Jesus made it a point to show us how this radically different teaching could be put into practice. Though the Roman Procurator had found Jesus innocent, he still condemned him to die on the cross to appease the fury of the Jewish leadership. All those who insulted

Jesus hanging on the Cross knew he was innocent. Despite the injustice done to him, Jesus prayed for them all from the Cross, providing us the greatest example of forgiving love. Jesus prayed even for those who crucified Him, “*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*” (Lk 23, 34).

All the New Testament books teach that only forgiving love would lead to true justice in the society. “*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.... Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord”. No, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing, you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*” (Rom 12, 14-21). Apostle Paul is giving this teaching quoting a passage from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs, “*If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the LORD will reward you*” (Prv 25, 21-22).

“*Coal of fire on the head*” refers to repentance and the ensuing reconciliation. When St. Paul proclaimed, “*For he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law*” (Rom 13, 8), he was stating that forgiving love is the foundation of all the other laws.

When people experience the forgiving love of God their lives are sustained and uplifted. This must motivate us all to forgive each other. The Apostle presents God the Father and Jesus Christ as the models of forgiving love. “*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*” (Eph 4, 31-32).

St. Peter also gives the same advice. *“All of you have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind. Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing”* (1 Pt 3, 8-9). St. John, the Apostle of love, asserts that *“God is love”* (1 Jn 4, 8-16) and goes on to teach us the same thing. *“If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen”* (1 Jn 4, 20).

From this brief analysis, we can conclude that only forgiving love would lead to creation of a just society. Punishing someone for the crime committed or avenging him would not in reality solve any problem or bring about lasting peace. It is forgiving love that brings about a change of heart and enables us to bond with each other as brothers and sisters. Lasting peace is possible only if people are prepared to forgive each other for all wrongdoings.

This is not to say that there is no need for laws or we cannot establish peace and justice through laws. What is stressed is that in order to enact just laws, those who frame the laws are to be guided by love and the tenets of universal brotherhood and equality. We must forsake selfishness and accept the others in a spirit of forgiving love. That is what Jesus proclaimed when he started His public ministry, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Mt 4,17). To make the Kingdom of God a reality and an experience, conversion of heart is a must. *“For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”* (Rom 14, 17). Openness to the Holy Spirit would ensure justice and peace.

8

Protectors of Life

“But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live” (Ex 1, 17).

Exodus is a decisive event that changed the history of humanity because of the positive interference of God. How did the chosen people of Israel, who had received many promises from God, end up as slaves in Egypt? The Book of Exodus provides the background about their becoming slaves, their liberation and their emergence as a powerful Empire. The actions of God surrounding the liberation of Israel serve as the basis for the teachings of the Bible on Social Justice.

Jacob and his family settled in Egypt when Hyksos, a foreign dynasty, was ruling Egypt (B.C. 1700- 1550). The bible tells the stories of Joseph and of how the Israelites reached Egypt. Joseph who had the highest power, next to the King, invited his family to make Egypt their home. With the approval of the Pharaoh, they were given the most fertile land in Egypt. As the honorable guests of the king, they were accorded special consideration and protection.

Years passed. The Egyptians defeated the Hyksos giving rise to a new dynasty. The new rulers did not respect Joseph’s descendants. The local people too grew jealous of the Israelites who were immigrants to Egypt. As a result, the Israelites were forced into slavery. Eventually their cry reached God. On the one hand the Egyptians needed the Israeli workforce for the country’s economy, but on the

other, they perceived the Israelites as a threat to their society. Their rapid growth in numbers exacerbated the threat factor and Pharaoh began to fear them.

He said to his people, *“Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war befall us, they would join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land. Therefore, they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens; and they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Ramses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel”* (Ex 1, 9-12).

Two things worried the Egyptians. One, in the event of a war, the Israelites might side with the enemy. Second, they might desert the country altogether. The Egyptians depended heavily on the Israeli workforce but they were apprehensive about their increasing numbers. They thought it wise to oppress them with excessive work. In fact, the taskmasters were set over them (Ex 1, 11).

But the strategy did not work. Hard work did not weaken the Israelites. Rather, the more they worked, the stronger they became. Hence, the Egyptians had to resort to new measures. They devised a plan to control the number of males in the Israeli population. They ordered the mid-wives to kill if a male child was born to the Israelites. Surprisingly some women took the initiative to oppose this unjust directive. *“But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live”* (Ex 1, 17). They put their own lives at risk by disobeying the royal command. They chose to fear God rather than the rulers.

The message the sacred author tries to convey is clear. If the law of man is in direct contravention of the law of

God, the law of God has to be obeyed. This is precisely what the brave Egyptian women did. It is worth noting that it was not some courageous men who stood for the cause of the slaves but simple women who feared God. They risked everything of theirs to save the hapless children.

When the Pharaoh questioned them, the women said, *“Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and are delivered before the midwife comes to them”* (Ex 1, 19). Some might question whether lying to the king was justified. The sacred author does not discuss it but leaves it to the readers to decide. However, one thing is certain. No one has the right to shed innocent blood. Even the mighty king comes under the law of God. Hence, if the command of the king is not in line with the law of God, the law of God should prevail. The law of the king has to be disregarded.

The Egyptian midwives had to make a choice between obeying the king and living by God’s commands. If they did not obey the king, they could lose their lives. If they did not obey the law of God, they risked losing eternal life. The midwives wisely chose to obey the law of God. And God protected them.

The Pharaoh was furious because his plan did not work out the way he had expected. So, he ordered next that all the male children born to the Hebrews should be thrown into the River Nile. *“Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live”* (Ex 1, 22). It was during this period that Moses was born. He was also thrown into the river but he was saved by the gracious act of an Egyptian woman, in fact Pharaoh’s own daughter.

Moses’ mother had kept the baby hidden for three months. Knowing that she could not hide him anymore, *“She took for him a basket made of bulrushes, and daubed*

it with bitumen and pitch; and she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds at the river's brink. And Moses' sister stood at a distance, to know what would be done to him. Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river; and her maidens walked beside the river; she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to fetch it. When she opened it, she saw the child; and lo, the babe was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So, the girl went and called the child's mother" (Ex 2, 3-8). It is clear that the mother of the child, his sister (of Moses) and Pharaoh's daughter acted as protectors of life.

It was women who fought and resisted the murderous supremacy of men, and started the liberation movement of the Israelites. *"When she opened it she saw the child; and lo, the babe was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children" (Ex 2, 6). It was compassion that moved the princess to save the baby, who was otherwise condemned to death as he was a Hebrew male child. This was in complete contrast to the attitude of Pharaoh who feared the growth of the Israelites. Thus, Moses who was to be the liberator of the Israelites grew up, like a prince, in the palace of the Pharaoh himself.*

When Moses grew up, he was furious seeing the misery of his people and the way they were treated by the Egyptians. He thought of liberating them by force. One day, *"He went out to his people and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Ex 2.11-12). The Pharaoh got to know about it. Moses knew that his life was in danger and so he escaped into the desert. He quickly*

realized that he would not be able to liberate his people by force.

What then is the way to justice? Liberation is not achieved by killing the oppressor. If we practice the law of “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” there will certainly be many people without eyes and teeth but it may not bring about justice in the society. The bloodshed in our streets speaks volumes about the failure of violence as a means to establish justice. Humanity had to wait for more than a thousand years to discover the path to lasting justice, the way of forgiving love.

St. John Paul II issued an encyclical called “*Evangelium Vitae*” (The Good News of Life), on 25 March 1995. In that Encyclical, the Pope speaks in detail about the modern versions of the Pharaoh who ordered a genocide and about a “culture of death”. While Pharaoh sought to kill off all the Israeli male infants by throwing them into the River Nile, Herod ordered the massacre of all the male children below the age of two in and around Bethlehem. Again and again, the evil characters seem to reappear in different forms. Pharaoh and Herod perceived a threat to their authority in the new born male children. Today some parents seem to regard their unborn child as a threat to their comfort.

On the global level, there are several plans and projects to get rid of unborn children, in the name of control and convenience. China had a law that prohibited the birth of a second child. More and more of our couples are opting for a one child policy. Going a step further, questions are being raised about the institution of marriage itself. Would it not be better if we adopt a practice of co-habitation without a formal marriage! There are also Governments today which approve of gay and lesbian marriages. Support for such unnatural life styles is ever on the increase.

There are feminists - women liberation groups - who argue that an unborn child is part of the mother's body and therefore the mother has full rights over that life. They go on to say that the mother has the liberty to allow the child to grow or to abort it. They demand that laws be enacted that would legitimize abortion at three months, or six months or even just before full maturity. There are some so-called progressive nations in the world which permit killing of the full grown baby in the womb of the mother, calling near-birth abortion. Special maternity clinics and hospitals have been set up for this purpose.

There are several other abominable practices in the world which may seem stranger than fiction. Factories exist in some places, which use the parts of the fetus for producing cosmetic products. It is reported that there are gynecologists who fry and consume the babies they aborted. People also speak of hotels which serve fried parts of the fetus as delicacies. Disgusting, aren't they? These places are nothing but dens of Satan.

Pharaoh who used to regard River Nile as a goddess went about, so it seemed, offering the Hebrew male children as sacrifice to that river goddess. There was a time when humans were immolated to placate the Gentile gods. Fortunately, they are branded today as uncultured and superstitious practices. It is estimated that annually more than five crore children are killed in the wombs of the mothers. Which demon are they trying to placate by these brutal, human sacrifices? The god they are trying to placate is no God. All this is motivated by a desire to lead a life of comfort and luxury, free of care and responsibility.

They might claim to be cultured and educated but they have no hesitation in indulging in cruelties involving unborn babies. Who on earth can make them realize that abortions and mercy killings are nothing but pre-meditated

murders! Such acts are clear violations of an individual's fundamental right to life. By so doing, the perpetrators of these crimes are showing disrespect and are committing violence, at conception and at the closing stages of life.

To fight against these modern Pharaohs, we require more people like Shiphrah and Puah, Jocebed and Miriam. People who fear God will always stand for life. The youth engaged in the fight against the death culture, are actually fighting against liars and murderers, the workers of Satan. We have to recognize that it is the work of the God of life.

The modern world is realizing, somewhat belatedly, that the culture of death cannot be allowed to continue. The phenomenon of greying population of the Western world, China changing the one child policy and trying persuade, it's citizen to produce more children, the situation of a large number of young men not being able to find a wife, the specter of empty schools, villages without children etc. must open our eyes to the stark reality and inspire us to become guardians of life. Only this way we shall be able to establish justice and enjoy a life of security. Plainly, a great disaster stares at our face if we fail to safeguard human life in our planet.

9

God Who Hears the Cry

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

The last chapters of the book of Genesis narrate how the Israelites, the heirs of numerous promises of God, left the Promised Land and settled in Egypt. The descendants of those who sold their brother as a slave, themselves became slaves eventually. The account of their liberation from the slavery in Egypt, gives us numerous lessons about Social Justice

Neither the attempts of a few women to save life nor the audacious act of Moses to gain liberation through force produced the desired result. The oppressed and the enslaved people could do nothing but cry out to God for help. They hoped that the Lord would hear their cry. Their hopes were not in vain.

The Book of Exodus bears ample proof that the cry of the oppressed will not remain unheard. When all the doors appeared shut and the people were in despair, in an unexpected manner, God intervened, revealing His true face. The face of God, revealed through the Book of Exodus, was something totally new, unknown until then. God revealed to Moses a name that had not been revealed to Abraham, Isaac or Jacob. God appeared to Moses in the

bush that was burning but not consumed by the fire. Moses was given the task of liberating the Israelites from slavery.

What was so special about this fire that it did not consume the bush? The general assumption is that the fire is the sign of God's holiness. More importantly, the context of the revelation is very significant, demanding attention. Because he had failed to liberate his people in Egypt, their pain and misery hounded Moses and formed like burning coals in his mind. Were they possibly the coals which appeared in the burning bush? Or was it the nature of God? If so, what was special about this vision? Does it signify that the innocent are being oppressed and manipulated? Or that helpless people are continually burning with pain?

God does not shut His eyes against the people who treat others with cruelty. The Exodus proves that God has the eyes to see the miseries of His people, ears to hear the cry of the oppressed and a heart to understand their pain. God heard the cry of the blood of Abel and confronted Cain about his crime. Almighty God not only enters into history but also terminates all the oppressions and steers the history of humanity in a new direction. That is the true nature of God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

God spoke to Moses who went to see what was happening with the bush that was burning but not being consumed. As he approached close to the bush, God said to Moses, *"Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground"* (Ex 3, 5). God revealed His holiness by responding to the cry of the oppressed. To be admitted into that holy presence, Moses had to remove his shoes and be prepared for total renewal. Giving up the path of violence that he was accustomed to, he had to adopt a new way, the way of the Lord, the way that the Lord shows. God chose Moses as the liberator because he was deeply concerned about the

sufferings of his people who had been turned into slaves in Egypt. The desire to liberate his people from Egypt had become the central goal of his life.

“Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt” (Ex 3, 10). The Lord will help him to liberate his people from their miseries not by weapons but by manifesting His power and authority. God asked Moses to put down the only weapon he had in his hand, the staff that he used to control the sheep. It was then that God appointed him and sent him to the Pharaoh in Egypt as His spokesperson and emissary. It was not the work of Moses or his power, but it was the hand of God that would make possible the liberation of his people from their slavery in Egypt. This conviction had to dawn first on Moses and then on Pharaoh and on the people of Israel. Through this great liberation, all would come to know who God is, His might and His power. This was made apparent all through the Exodus event.

God commanded Moses to pick up the staff that He had ordered him to put down. It was with that staff that Moses would confront the Egyptian army that chased the Israelites and the might of the Red Sea which posed an obstacle to their onward journey. It was not the leadership of Moses or the strength of the Israelites which brought about the liberation of the people from slavery but it was entirely the work of God who heard the cry of the oppressed. It was to establish this truth beyond any doubt that God deputed Moses with no other weapon but the staff.

The name that God revealed to Moses in the beginning of the Exodus event deserves special mention. *“If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them? God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’.* And he said, *“Say this to the people of*

Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'. God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': this is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations" (Ex 3,13-15). Name is a definition. God's name was unknown to the people. They could not comprehend God who is Omnipotent and Omnipresent. Consequently, people were left wondering about the meaning and the relevance of the name "Yahweh" that God had revealed.

The response God gave to Moses needs to be examined closely. Moses asked for the name of God and the response was "I Am Who Am". Only God could say that "I am who am" as God's name cannot be connected to anything else. How can we then come to know this God? Only through His actions. That is the unique nature of the revelation that Moses received. Because of the great reverence for God, the Jews would not pronounce the name "Yahweh" but use the word "*Adonai*" which means Lord, to refer to "Yahweh". God further defined His name, "*I am Yahweh and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment, and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am Yahweh your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians*" (Ex 6, 6-7). God revealed Himself through His action, the action of liberating the Israelites from their miseries in Egypt.

Egypt faced severe retribution for its refusal to free Israel from slavery. One after another, several punishments fell on them. It was clearly the work of God. Cruelty of man against man would invite severe retribution from God. The plagues that affected Egypt show that the punishment gets executed through the forces of nature. God said to Adam,

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life” (Gen 3, 17). After Cain killed his brother, God said to him, “Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you, its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (Gen 4, 11-12). The same thing befell Egypt through the epidemic.

The lesson taught by the plagues applies to today’s situation more than ever. The first plague was about water becoming so polluted, that it was unfit for drinking. The plagues that followed one by one showed that the powers of nature had turned against man. Today we are experiencing a more acute form of all those plagues. The air and water are polluted. The soil is ruined by pesticides. Farmers are using more and more poison to deal with the pests that attack the crops. All these are causing great changes in the weather pattern. Global warming is leading to the rise in the sea level. The deserts are expanding with droughts. Spread of epidemics, resulting in the death of crores of people, coupled with volcanic eruptions, has created a scary situation. The latest in the series is the pandemic Covid 19 that has put the whole world in panic. The climate change and other natural disasters seem to indicate as if God, who hears the cry of the oppressed, might be planning another exodus.

After the death of the first-borns, Pharaoh allowed the Israelites to go but then he changed his mind and chased them which resulted in his armies perishing in the Red Sea. The Egyptian army thought that they could capture the Israelites through the path that appeared in the Red Sea. By the time they realized that God was on the side of the

Israelites and He was fighting on their behalf, the Egyptian armies were perishing in the sea. *“The Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from before Israel; for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians’* (Ex 14, 25). They came to this realization too late and they could not save themselves. In panic, they rushed back into the raging sea. They lost all the opportunities they had to repent and disaster followed.

These incidents provide insights about the kind of relationship people should have with one another and with the nature. It is apparent that God sides with those who are denied justice. The fields of Pharaoh were soaked with the sweat and blood of the Israelite slaves who had to toil hard to make the bricks. The task masters kept on lashing them to do more and their cry reached God who responded at the appropriate time. Man is called to take care of the soil (Gen 2, 15) and to take care of his brother (Gen 4, 9). When he forgets his mission and misuses the earth and oppresses his brother, God who revealed Himself through the events of the exodus, would not stay inactive.

“Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the LORD that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover I will not let Israel go’ (Ex 5, 2). Visible in these words is Pharaoh’s arrogance which led to the great disaster in the Red Sea. His heart was hardened to the point that God had to show His might and His inclination to side with the oppressed. The sacred author has carefully recorded these events as a warning to all who might be tempted to oppress other human beings. God who hears the cry of the oppressed would execute justice. The bodies of the Egyptians who perished in the Red Sea are a stark reminder that anyone persisting with injustice, oppression and exploitation of the innocent will have to pay a heavy price for their misadventures.

God who heard the cry of the oppressed was not con-

tent with bringing them out of their slavery. He led them through the wilderness. He went ahead of them to lead, behind them to give protection, above them to offer them blessings and hovered over them to shade them from the sun. He fed them with the bread from heaven, sent them quails when they cried for meat and supplied them with water from the rock to quench their thirst.

While the plagues that affected Egypt were signs of God's wrath with the unjust, the protection extended to the Israelites in the desert was the mark of justice given to the oppressed. The people of Israel who had the experience God's might, mercy and care must turn into a new People, and be the messengers of peace and of justice. It was for this purpose that God protected them and guided them in their journey through the desert. They should bear witness to the deliverance and the chastisement of God, uphold justice and be the bearers of God's blessing. The precepts of the Covenant at Mount Sinai and the Commandments of God would provide them with the necessary guidelines.

10

Commandments - the Foundation of Justice

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; and I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect” (Lev 26,13).

With a mighty hand, God liberated the people of Israel from the slavery in Egypt. He desired that no one should make them slaves again and they should not enslave anyone either. They must walk erect and move with dignity and pride as the people of God. They have to be a model for all the peoples in the world. Man was created in the image and likeness of God and therefore, all the people should be able to live with freedom and dignity. What is needed is an appropriate social structure to ensure that this happens.

In the plan of God, humans are designed as social beings. They should live and grow as a community based on justice. The Ten Commandments were given as part of the precepts of the Covenant. The Decalogue remains as the basic guide of social justice for all the communities at all times.

The Decalogue is known as the Commandments of the Covenant. A covenant is understood as an agreement between two parties. The Covenant concluded at Mount Sinai was to provide directions for a harmonious and fruit-

ful relationship between God and man, and between man and man. People have to accept the Covenant and obey the Commandments. Ex 19-20 sets forth the context in which the Commandments were given and the conditions contained in the Covenant. *“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 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, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel”* (Ex 19, 4-6).

“Holy” means something which is set aside for God. It could be a place, an object, a time or a person. God designed Israel to be a holy nation because God had chosen them as His own people. They were called to be a priestly people and to act as the mediators between God and all other peoples in the world. A priest is one who functions as a bridge between God and people. He must communicate the will of God to the people and teach them to live according to His Commandments. At the same time, he is to present before God the prayers, the offerings and the needs of the people. Creating a community of people according to the plan of God is the responsibility of the priest. He then presents the community to God as an acceptable gift. This is the basic duty of the priests.

People of Israel were called to perform such a priestly duty in the world, among the nations. Not only the selected tribe of Levi, but the entire people of Israel carried this responsibility. This was what God meant by calling them a priestly people. To perform the priestly duty, people had to adopt a particular life style, which is spelt out in the Decalogue.

The “Ten Commandments” could be divided into two

parts. The first part, comprising of the first three Commandments, sets forth the conditions for the relationship between God and the people. The remaining seven Commandments deal with the relationship among the people. The central point to note is that the relationship with God is the foundation for the relationship among the people. Awareness of this linkage is essential for the realization that the relationships among the people should be guided by justice.

Though all agree that the “Ten Commandments” represent the precepts of the Covenant made at Mount Sinai, there are certain differences in the order and number of the Commandments followed by the Protestants and the Catholics. In the case of Catholics, the law that deals with the Sabbath is held as the Third Commandment, while the Protestants regard it as the Fourth Commandment. Protestants view the Commandment that prohibits idol worship as the Second Commandment, whereas the Catholics consider it as part of the First Commandment, which says that we are to worship only the Almighty God and no other. For the same reason there is a difference in the Tenth Commandment. For the Protestants, the law that forbids coveting the property of the neighbor includes the wife, the donkey and the house. On the other hand, the Catholics divide it into two Commandments, namely 9 and 10. Thus a distinction is made between people, animals and other things. Wife and donkey are not given the same status in the Catholic version of the Ten Commandments.

This difference is seen in the Bible itself. There are two versions of the Ten Commandments, presented in Ex 20, 1-17 and Dt 5, 5-21. The Protestants accept the first version that belongs to the “P” source while the Catholics accept the version in Deuteronomy that belongs to the “D” source. There are differences of emphasis in the two ver-

sions. This will be discussed later. Though there are some variations in the two versions, there is not much difference in the ideas as such. Both versions deal with the same code of laws.

A detailed analysis of the Commandments is not intended in this study, as our focus is on Social Justice and related issues. The first three Commandments teach that the faithful must worship only the Almighty God; God's Name should not be taken in vain and the seventh day of the week, Sabbath, should be observed as holy.

The First Commandment serves as the foundation of the Decalogue that deals with the worship of God. The Commandment says who God is, what He did for the people and what type of relationship people should have with God. The essence of the First Commandment is: *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me"* (Dt. 5, 6-7). The second part of this Commandment prohibits idol worship and making of idols. *"You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me"* (Dt 5, 8-9).

Israel was commanded to worship the Almighty God who liberated them from the slavery in Egypt. The Lord who revealed himself to Moses on Mount Sinai emphasizes the liberation to be indicative of the nature of God. At the same time attention was directed to the actual experiences of the people, in particular, to the way He liberated them from the slavery in Egypt, the oppression they suffered, the mighty power of God, the protection they experienced and

the way they were fed with bread from the sky, the quails from the desert and water from the rock.

Adoration or worship means total dedication or consecration. It enables the person to develop the conviction that God is the source and the goal, and that all that he is and all that he has is a free gift of God. The devotee has no other goal except to become one with God. Someone could ask if this is not another kind of slavery. Hearing the cry of the people, God came down and liberated them. What He desires is not the submission of a slave but the love of children. There is no reason for any concern regarding the worship of God because He is the very foundation of human freedom and social justice. History has proven that in a society which does not worship God there would not be personal freedom or social justice.

The Commandment, which prohibits any other gods, might give the impression that there are other gods. What is intended is that nothing else should be allowed to take the place of God. If someone worships anything else, he would become its slave and would automatically lose the freedom that God has given us. Almighty God is one who breaks the yokes and unties the knots to make the person free. Hence the First Commandment, which demands the worship of the Almighty God, is the foundation of all the other Commandments and of Social Justice. If someone gives the position of God to any man-made thing or ideology, he would himself become its slave and would gradually enlist several others as its slaves.

Jesus called “Mammon” anything that takes the place of God. It could be “money”, or power or a dehumanizing ideology. St. Paul explains the implications of becoming slaves to anything other than God. *“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For*

what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools” (Rom 1, 18-22).

“Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Rom 1, 28-31).

Respecting leaders, honoring statues or seeking the intercession of saints is not in itself idol worship. There are fundamental differences between worship and honor. Showing respect or seeking the intercession is not worship. But, viewing the saints as miracle workers and devotion to them as a means of obtaining what one wants could degenerate into idol worship. Only God alone can perform miracles. The saints can only intercede for the faithful. Any contrary beliefs could entail violation of the First Commandment.

When one believes that statues of the same saint placed in different places have differences in power, attention is getting shifted from God to that particular statue, and this could turn into idol worship. Only God has the power to perform miracles. No statue or a saint has that power. In some churches, there is the practice of dedicating children as slaves to saints, making them ardent devotees. If it means offering prayers and seeking the intercession of the

saint, there is nothing objectionable with it. Otherwise, it might amount to idol worship and, therefore, a violation of the First Commandment.

The Second Commandment, “Thou shall not take God’s name in vain”, refers to expressing due respect and submission to God. The reference is also to preservation of social justice. One, who swears by the name of God about things that are not true, is implicating God’s name in the injustice and that is a grave insult to God. It also implies cheating man who is created in the image and the likeness of God. So clearly, the Second Commandment also provides protection to human beings.

The Third Commandment deals with observance of Sabbath. Those who toil through the week should get time to rest and find time to worship God. God completed the creation in six days and rested on the seventh day. So, Sabbath is akin to partaking of the rest of God. While the “P” source places emphasis on worshipping God (Ex 20, 8-11) the “D” source stresses providing rest to those who work. *“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, 15).

People who work have a right to rest. Rest is needed for mind and body. Such rest would provide time to deepen the awareness of God and also to recuperate physically and mentally. The observance of Sabbath would help man not to become a slave to work. Of late there is a tendency not only to break the law of the Sabbath but also to deprive people of the much-needed rest. When work and making money become obsessions, the means are turned into ends, with all the inevitable consequences.

In short, the first three Commandments that deal with

the God-man relationship assure social justice and protect the rights of people. Where these laws are violated, emergence of slavery is a certainty, leading to loss of freedom. The remaining seven Commandments also touch upon various issues of social justice and offer us the necessary guidance.

11

Home, the Nursery School for Social Justice

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you” (Ex 20, 12).

The first three Commandments deal with the relationship between God and man. The next seven Commandments deal with the laws governing the relationships among people. Of the seven, the first one, which is cited above, is about honoring parents. The laws that should be observed in the family, the basic unit of the society, are outlined in this Commandment.

The Commandment speaks not only of the obligations of children towards their parents but also of the obligations of parents towards their children. The regulations needed for a just society are included in this Commandment. This is a law that is mentioned several times in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. The official teaching of the Catholic Church regarding this law is elaborated in CCC § 2168-2256.

When the Commandments move from God-man relationship to the relationships among people, the first subject discussed is the relationship in the family, duties of children towards parents and of parents towards children. Life belongs to God and it is given to the children through the parents. God created man and woman and told them, *“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen*

1, 28). They were blessed to be fruitful and to fill the earth. The family, the basic unit and the foundation of the society, consists primarily of parents and children. Hence the law about the family takes precedence over all other laws.

As if to motivate children to honor their parents, a reward is assured. It is the first law with the promise of a reward attached to it. *“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you”* (Ex 20, 12). Paul in the letter to the Ephesians points out this as the first commandment with a promise: *“Honor your father and mother”-- this is the first commandment with a promise: so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth*” (Eph 6,2-3). What is this promise? The reference in the promise “that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you” seems to be to the Kingdom of God. If people obey the precepts of the Covenant, they could hope to live in the Promised Land, which is the symbol of the Kingdom of God.

However, there are frequent warnings that if they fail to live according to the Commandments of God, they will be thrown out of the Promised Land. This is the main theme of the Book of Lamentations. The prophets had given repeated warnings but the people did not pay heed to them. Finally they had to pay the price for their disobedience, exile (Jer 34, 18-22). The land that the Lord gives is the Promised Land, though the promise of the Lord was not confined to land only.

The warning God gave to the first man and woman in the Paradise is relevant here. *“Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die”* Gen 2, 17). They did not die immediately following their disobedience, but they became aware of their nakedness and felt ashamed. They feared

the presence of God. In fact, even before being physically cast out the Paradise, they lost their intimacy with God. The true meaning of Paradise is a life with God. Losing Paradise would mean being cut away from the Divine life.

From this point of view, the Fourth Commandment, the promise and the warning contained therein, would become more evident. The Kingdom of God is not of this world or a part of this earth, but it is participation in the Divine life. To be eligible to participate, one has to honor one's parents who gave him life.

What does 'long time' mean? How many years would qualify as a 'long time'? "*The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.* years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away" (Ps 90 10). If a person lives up to a hundred years, can we regard it as a long life? On the other hand, what can we say about people who die young? St. Teresa of Lisieux died at the age of 24. Was it because she did not honor her parents? Far from it! It is clear that 'long time' does not necessarily mean a long life on earth but it refers to eternal life with the Lord. Simply put, to deserve eternal life with the Lord, one has to honor one's parents.

'Honoring parents' has several implications. Bible repeatedly reminds of the kind of attitude children should have towards their parents and how they are to be treated "*Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and reject not your mother's teaching*" (Pro 1, 8) "*My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching*" (Pro 6, 20). "*With all your heart honor your father, and do not forget the birth pangs of your mother. Remember that through your parents you were born; and what can you give back to them that equal their gift to you?*" (Sir 7, 27-28).

The Fourth Commandment is a reminder to children about the responsibilities towards their parents. It is not enough that children live by the advice of the parents. They should also take care of them, especially when they are aged and sick. Neglect of parents would incur the wrath of God. *“Hearken to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old” (Pro 23, 22). “He who robs his father or his mother and says, “That is no transgression”, is the companion of a man who destroys” (Pro 28, 24). “The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures” (Pro 30, 17). “Whoever honors his father atones for sins and whoever glorifies his mother is like one who lays up treasure” (Sir 3, 3-4).*

The children have to obey, honor and provide whatever parents require to lead a secure life. Let them not be made to feel unwanted or neglected. Instead, let there be a continuous outpouring of love and gratitude to them. Human life endures through generations. Children of today would observe how their parents are dealing with their own aged parents in their last days. Grown-up sons and daughters should bear in mind that someday soon they too would be aged and helpless, requiring the support of their children.

Jesus often spoke about children’s responsibilities towards their parents, laying stress on this Commandment. In his reply to the ruler who asked what one should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus gives emphasis to interpersonal relationships, especially the relation between parents and children: *“Do not commit adultery, do not kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother” (Lk 18, 20).* Jesus teaches that ignoring or neglecting this commandment is a grievous sin, thereby stressing the need of protecting and caring for the parents. This is quite evident in his criticism against the Pharisees: *“ For Moses*

said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die'; but you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, what you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God) then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother" (Mk 7, 9-12).

There are two sides to this Commandment. As children have responsibility towards their parents, parents also have responsibility towards their children. "*Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it*" (Pro 22, 6). Parents should be role models for their children and guide them in their lives. It is from parents that children learn the first lessons of life. If children recognize harmony between what parents say and what they do, they will be inspired and will follow their example. "*Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him*" (Pro 22, 15).

The book of Sirach describes in detail how parents should deal with their children to inculcate discipline in them. "*He who loves his son will whip him often, in order that he may rejoice at the way he turns out... He who spoils his son will bind up his wounds, and his feelings will be troubled at every cry.... Pamper a child, and he will frighten you; play with him, and he will give you grief. ... Bow down his neck in his youth, and beat his sides while he is young, lest he become stubborn and disobey you, and you have sorrow of soul from him. Discipline your son and take pains with him, that you may not be offended by his shamelessness*" (Sir 30, 1-13).

Parents should accept, love and value their children as God's gifts. The children have been entrusted to their care to be brought up in the fear of God. This is a God-given responsibility. St. Paul draws our attention to an important aspect of the Fourth Commandment. "*Fathers, do not pro-*

voke your children, lest they become discouraged” (Col 3, 21).

There is reference to people in authority in the Fourth Commandment. Just as in a family, in the society too there are authority figures whose directives have to be obeyed as long as they are in conformity with the laws of God. Rules and regulations are essential for the common good and for the smooth functioning of a just society. St. Paul exhorts the faithful to respect the people in authority as they are appointed by God. *“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.... Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. Therefore, one must be subject, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.... Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due” (Rom 13, 1-7).*

St. Peter calls attention to the societal basis of the Fourth Commandment. *“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ... For it is God’s will that by doing right you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God” (1 Pt 2, 13, 1-7).*

That there is a rational basis for the Fourth Commandment - to honor the parents – needs no mention. Social justice cannot exist without a rational foundation. But at a practical level, there exists a lot of confusion and misunderstanding. Couples who have come to regard children as a nuisance and grown-up children who see parents as a burden are on the increase. Many are pushing their aged par-

ents into Old Age Homes. The old family ties are broken and the bonds destroyed when families, largely engaged in agriculture, moved from rural areas into urban centers and formed nuclear families. Against this background, how should we view the Fourth Commandment?

Old Age Homes are not the ideal solution to the care of aged parents, nor huge mansions. Wealthy children, settled abroad build huge, luxurious homes for their parents. But the parents, aged and infirm, live like prisoners in those mansions, with no one to care for them. People had assumed that a one-child family would be a happy situation. The child is given the best possible education to enable him to secure a job abroad. The result is that the child is comfortably settled abroad while the parents lead a lonely life here in India. This is the inevitable consequence of our unbridled ambitions and distorted mindsets.

The Fourth Commandment should force us to review our priorities and attitudes about wealth and happiness. An overseas job with a handsome salary is not the be-all and the end-all of life. We have to revisit our beliefs and values, our convictions and ambitions, to determine whether what we are striving at is likely to contribute to our happiness and to fulfill our responsibilities, particularly the care of our aged parents.

Are we inculcating in our children the discipline they require for their future success and well-being? Strangely, a new educational system has emerged which prohibits imposing punishment on children. It is not clear what will the progress of children be in such a system. Letting children to behave as they please and to follow their inclinations unchecked will be disastrous. A situation of rights without responsibilities is ominous. Could this be one of the reasons for the neglect of parents? A group which is aware only of its rights is headed in a wrong direction and is likely to

bring about its own downfall. Certainly, it is on a collision course with the Fourth Commandment.

Practice of justice both at home and in the society is essential to qualify to be a member of the Kingdom of God and to participate in the Divine life. The right environment has to be created. Children need to fulfill their obligations towards parents and likewise parents towards children. Practices like avoidance of children by married couples and gay or lesbian marriages are unlikely to contribute to the creation of a just society. The ill effects are already seen in the nations which permit experiments of this kind.

“The well-being of the individual person and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life” (CCC § 2250). “It is the duty of citizens to work with civil authority for building up society in a spirit of truth, justice, solidarity, and freedom” (CCC § 255).

12

Protection for Life

A rich young man approached Jesus and asked Him what he had to do to attain eternal life. Jesus listed the Commandments to him beginning with, “**Do not kill**” (Mk 10, 19). Of the Ten Commandments, the fifth one is “*You shall not kill*” (Ex 20, 14; Dt. 5, 17). Though the Commandment is phrased in a negative way, its main aim is to emphasize the value of life and the need to preserve it at any cost. The next five Commandments are also to be viewed in a similar manner. Clearly, all the Commandments, with regard to their goal and content, are aimed at safeguarding the rights of all.

The official teaching of the Catholic Church regarding the Fifth Commandment is given in CCC§ 2258-2330 and in YOUCAT. § 378-399. Instead of discussing the threats to life and the need to protect it, we want to focus our attention on the teachings of the Bible with regard to preservation of life.

All life, and not just human life, is precious. Animals and plants too are precious in the eyes of God. No doubt the food chain is in operation, whereby one creature becomes the food of another. Even so, man carries responsibility for the care of all the creatures on earth. The need to protect life has become an urgent necessity because nature has come under serious threat. The Apostolic Letter, “*Lauda-to Si*” decries the abuse of environment and highlights the need to take care of nature.

While importance of life in all its forms is stressed,

human life is given special emphasis in the Bible, from the very first Book. There cannot be any debate about the uniqueness of human life because God made man in his own image and likeness. *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth”*. So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1, 26-27). Highest value is placed on human life not only in the first narrative of the first chapter belonging to the Priestly Tradition (P) but also in the second account in the second chapter that is generally attributed to the Yahwist Tradition (J).

“Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Gen 2, 7). It is the very life of God which is throbbing in the lungs of man who was brought into existence through the breath of God. Therefore, every person is precious in the eyes of God. Into the human body which is made of clay, God infused the precious gift of life. Man was given dominion over all the creatures (Gen 1, 28) and he was made the caretaker (Gen 2, 15) of the earth, entrusted with the task of protecting nature. Any threat to human life, therefore, will be viewed by God with great seriousness.

Death came into the world through a murder is plainly stated in the Bible (Gen 4, 8). The reason for the murder is not known, yet from the manner God confronted the murderer, the significance of the Fifth Commandment is all too apparent. *“What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand”* (Gen 4,

10-11). The recognition that Abel whom he killed is his brother should remind him of his duty to be a guard and protector of him

Cain realized that he had lost his right to live because he had killed his brother. He cries out with deep distress, “Whoever finds me will slay me”. But the Lord, so to say, stood by the importance of the Fifth Commandment, “*Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! If anyone slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold”. And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him” (Gen 4, 15).* God assured protection even to the murderer and told him, “If anyone slays Cain; vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold”. We can see that God was not granting license to anyone to kill even in revenge, but upholding the duty of protecting life at all costs.

In the new World Order that came into existence after the great flood, the Commandment, which gives importance to human life, is proclaimed with greater force. “*For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; of every beast I will require it and of man; of every man’s brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image” (Gen 9, 5-6).* The principle that persons not respecting others’ life forfeit their own right to life puts a moratorium on all types of violence and provides protection to life.

The rule of avenging wrongs in equal measure requires careful study. “*Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free for the eye’s sake. If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free for the tooth’s sake” (Ex 21, 24-27).* The law makes it plain that harming an-

other will invite retaliation of some kind. The wording of the law could be interpreted incorrectly, as if avenging is permitted, but the true purpose is protection of life.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church lists and explains this law under three titles namely, Respect for Human Life, Dignity of the Individuals and Preservation of Peace (CCC§ 2258-2330). The ultimate goal is protection of life, of innocent lives. Not only direct killing, but any act that harms and endangers human life, is forbidden, come as it does under the purview of this law.

“Like one who kills a son before his father’s eyes is the man who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor. The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood. To take away a neighbor’s living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood” (Sir 34, 20-22). These teachings of the Bible shed light on the different aspects of this Commandment. It is wrong to deny the wages to the one who has labored. Likewise, taking wages for work not done is also unlawful. Paying the laborers according to their needs and the agreed terms is mandated under this Commandment.

Prophet Micah elucidates the social aspects of this Commandment, *“You who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin from off my people, and their flesh from off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron”* (Micah 3, 2-3).

The same message is conveyed with greater force by St. James in his letter, often referred to as the Prophetic book of the New Testament. *“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your*

gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you” (James 5, 1-6).

The Fifth Commandment lays down that human life should be protected always and everywhere, especially when the person is weak and poor. Modern laws which authorize abortion and mercy-killing strike at life when it is at its weakest. As such, these laws have to be evaluated in the light of this Commandment. On the face of it, they seem incompatible with God’s laws. Majority opinion is no criterion for favoring laws which authorize extinguishing life at its most vulnerable moments.

Disparity and injustice, which seem to be part of the global economic system, drive many to suicide. Malnutrition renders millions of people seriously ill and susceptible to illness and death. Any economic system that turns a blind eye to the wide disparities in income levels among the people cannot stand the scrutiny of the Fifth Commandment. The rich man enjoyed banquets and bountiful meals without any concern to Lazarus who was starving to death at his door step (Lk 16, 19-31). Jesus made it clear that the rich man was squarely responsible for Lazarus’s condition. Those who disregard the needs of others and carry on with their own luxurious lives will have to give an account of their deeds, in fact, of their misdeeds, to the Creator.

Jesus introduced the Fifth Commandment in a completely new way by linking it with the presence of the Kingdom of God. Jesus said, “*You have heard that it was*

said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment'. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire" (Mt 5, 21-22).

Jesus teaches that actions which can lead to enmity among people should be avoided altogether. *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth... Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; ... Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.... I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; ... For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?... And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Mt 5, 38-47).* The heavenly Father loves and protects all and so *"Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5, 48).*

Evidently, it is not possible for anyone to be perfect as the Heavenly Father. What, then, does this injunction mean? St Luke has clarified its meaning. *"Be merciful, even as your father is merciful" (Lk 6, 36).* The commitment that Jesus demands of his followers is way above all the laws of the world. Compassion is what Jesus asks of his disciples. "Be merciful", says he. Jesus wants us to be sensitive to the needs of others and help them wholeheartedly without considering whether they deserve our mercy or not. Insensitivity has no place in a person or a society guided by mercy.

Rightly, of late, there is a lot concern about wild life

and preservation of wild life. However, care of the animals cannot be at the cost of human beings or their basic needs. An impression is gaining ground that wild animals should be allowed to roam free, even if they may pose a threat to people or their property or their produce. Are we not stretching things too far? Human life should always have precedence over the rights of animals. Are the animal lovers aware of the heart break a farmer suffers when his crops, cultivated carefully, is destroyed by wild animals, depriving him of his livelihood, or worse still, when people are being killed by wild animals?

We need to create a just and a balanced society, where everyone, including animals, enjoys protection. Letting wild animals move around freely will endanger not only the lives of people but the life of the animals themselves because of the risk of retaliation. There is much talk about street dogs today. Many dog lovers argue that the dogs should be allowed to roam free, despite the threat they pose to the children in the locality. This is surely a case of misplaced animal love. A more enlightened approach is needed to deal with such challenges. Suitable measures and controls should be put in place that would ensure the safety of people and at the same time provide for maximum possible freedom to animals to have a life of their own. The Fifth Commandment “Not to kill” is an essential foundation for establishing Social Justice in the world.

13

Private Property

The precepts of the Decalogue prescribe the conditions necessary for making life safe, secure and happy. In this chapter, the discussion is all about the Seventh and the Tenth Commandments. These two Commandments deal with the material circumstances, necessary to preserve life, to make it grow and develop. While the Seventh Commandment prohibits stealing of goods, the Tenth Commandment forbids even desiring things which belong to others. No one should misappropriate anything which belongs to another person. Clearly protection is assured to all the creatures through this legislation, enacted by God Himself.

This is a foundational law in the realm of Social Justice. The various aspects of this law are dealt with in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) Nos. 2401-2463; 2634-2557; and in the YOUCAT Nos. 426-451; 465-468. No detailed study on Private Property is contemplated here, but just a brief discussion on a few issues covered in the Bible, particularly in the Pentateuch. In the following chapters we shall deal with the prophetic view and the teaching of the New Testament on the subject.

Ownership of private property is founded in the doctrine that God is the creator and owner of the universe. *“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 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel”* (Ex 19, 5-6). *“The*

land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev 25, 23).

God has given the right to man and to all the creatures to live in the universe that He has made. There is adequate space and sufficient resources for all, man and creatures alike, to live on and to prosper. However, man does not have ownership but only the right to use the resources as God’s representative on earth. Also, there is a limit to his rights imposed by the needs of others.

The Commandment states that man has to respect the rights of others to their belongings, both movable and immovable. This law is found not only in the Bible but in all the societies of the world. There is no nation on earth which does not support this law. It is not fair or lawful that property earned by one is misappropriated by somebody else. This law has been in existence from time immemorial. Violation of this law is certain to lead to conflicts, violence and strife.

However, criteria may vary for determining what constitutes stealing in the strict sense. Misappropriating another’s property will certainly fall within the ambit of stealing. However, some actions which are regarded as stealing in our cultures may not really be so and may not amount to violation of the Commandment, ‘not to steal’.

The earth was created for the benefit of all and so everything in the world belongs to all the people. Every person, family and society has the right to avail of what is needed for survival. Therefore, there has to be a proper balance between private property and common property. The balance is provided by the law that prohibits stealing.

The Commandment has actually two sides. On the negative side, the law forbids appropriating someone else’s property. On the other hand, the Commandment decrees

that all must have what they need for their living. Both aspects are based on the Divine law.

The task of man is discernible in the mission God entrusted to him. *“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’. So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen 1, 26-28).* This is further explained in Genesis 2, 5-14. God placed man in the Garden of Eden to protect it and to make it productive. God has provided us with whatever is needed to grow and to expand. Man’s task is to make the earth productive and to ensure that the produce is made available to all. The purpose of the Seventh and the Tenth Commandments is to urge man to carry out this responsibility.

The people of Israel learned this lesson through their experiences during their journey to the Promised Land. As slaves they had toiled hard for many years and had made Egypt rich. But they did not receive just wages for their toil. The Bible says that they asked for and received ornaments of Silver and Gold when they left Egypt. *“So, the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their mantles on their shoulders. The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked of the Egyptians jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing; and the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they despoiled the Egyptians” (Ex 12, 34-36).* The Commandment ‘not

to steal' was fully observed in spirit. Israel took only what belonged to them rightfully.

The Bible says that making food available for the hungry is far more important than safeguarding the produce of one's land. The Book of Leviticus contains this instruction: *"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God"* (Lev 19, 9-10). Similarly, the book of Deuteronomy (Dt. 23, 24-25) permits eating of the grapes while walking through the vineyard.

Yet another side of the law can be seen in the conditions laid down about the "Manna" God dropped from the sky. They were allowed to collect only as much as they needed for the day and nothing more. *"This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Gather of it, every man of you, as much as he can eat; you shall take an omer a piece, according to the number of the persons whom each of you has in his tent'"* (Ex 16.16). However, some people violated the law and collected more than they needed. But, strange, when they measured it there was no difference. All got equal portions. Again, it was made clear that people could collect only what was needed for the day and they were to keep nothing for the next day. Some disregarded this law. Again, they found the portion they had set aside for the next day was spoiled (Ex 16, 17-21). The message has been made clear. Everyone is to collect only what is needed. No one is allowed to accumulate wealth beyond what is required or to grow excessively rich.

This regulation was applicable not only to the "Manna" but also to the land and all its produce. When the land of Canaan was divided among the tribes of Israel, each one

received a piece of land as inheritance and it was not to be disposed of for any reason. If for some reason the inherited property was given to another person, it should be restored to the original owner during the Jubilee year. *“But if he has not sufficient means to get it back for himself, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of him who bought it until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property”* (Lev, 25, 28).

God created human beings free. The people of Israel were later liberated from the slavery in Egypt. Such a people should never be slaves again. Likewise, they are not to enslave anyone either. If someone became a slave for some reason, and if he is an Israelite, he should be freed during the Sabbath year. If he is a Gentile, he should be freed during the Jubilee year (Dt 10, 12; Lev 25, 39-55). Thus, Sabbath years and Jubilee years were turned into occasions for the discharge of Social Justice.

Misappropriating the property of a neighbour was regarded as a serious offense that would invite the curse of God. *“Cursed be he who removes his neighbor’s landmark. And all the people shall say, ‘Amen’”* (Dt 27, 17). This law, and the curse its violation entails, are applicable not only to property disputes with a neighbour, but also to border disputes among nations. All the wars in the world are caused by encroachments of the borders of one nation by another. Even today most conflicts among nations have their origin in border disputes and skirmishes.

Instances of violation of this law abound in our society. Seizing the little land a marginal farmer has, ostensibly for a new big industry or infrastructure development, and then failing to give a fair compensation, is one such example. Thousands are left homeless because the law is blatantly violated. If elected leaders in a democratic nation can be so callous and unjust, what can be expected of rulers of

autocratic societies? Those who are guilty will have to face trial in God's court on the judgement day.

As part of this Commandment, the Bible makes some important proposals with regard to wages. It is the labour of the people which creates wealth. Therefore, those who labour should be paid the wages they deserve. Unfortunately, this is not done by many employers and masters who hire labourers. The Bible does not take kindly to this offence.

“You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns; you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it, before the sun goes down (for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it); lest he cry against you to the LORD, and it be sin in you” (Dt 24. 14-15). “To take away a neighbor's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood” (Sir 34, 22). “Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts (Jas 5, 4).

Unfair labour practices abound in the world. To begin with, not paying just wages to a poor labourer, who is eking out a living, is akin to robbing him of his meagre possessions. Other forms of injustice include differential payments for similar jobs done by two different people, based on sex, race, colour or nationality. What is worse, in some cases, persons engaged in lighter and easier jobs are paid far more than those who have to carry out strenuous work. This defies all logic and canons of justice. Such a practice is rightly regarded as a robbery of some kind.

Differences in payments to Doctors, Nurses and Housekeeping staff do merit scrutiny. Some amount of variation in payments to different professionals because of

higher education and skill requirements is understandable. However, while exorbitant salaries amounting to millions are paid to doctors, miserly amounts are paid to the other hospital staff. This is a totally unacceptable situation. It may well qualify to be a kind of stealing. Inducting highly reputed doctors in hospitals with the sole purpose of making money is also condemnable. It is such hospitals which overcharge patients even for normal care and services. If not paying just wages is regarded as stealing, charging excessive fees, totally disproportionate to the services rendered, may also amount to stealing indeed.

Going further, bribery, whether taking or giving, for unlawful favours, may have also to be included in the category of stealing. Worse is the case, where bribery is demanded and taken for carrying out normal duties, like clearing a file. There are persons who are neck deep in huge bribery transactions, but have no scruples in framing charges against others, juniors in particular, who are involved in minor corruption matters. The Bible sounds a warning to all such persons: *“You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right”* (Ex 23, 8; Dt 16, 19).

Injustice is widely prevalent in the world of business and violations of the Commandment are all too common. In the name of profits, what is actually done is profiteering. One wonders how on earth some of the banks and industries are able to generate the profits they make? Pharmaceutical companies systematically exploit their customers and end up with crores of Rupees in profits. On the other hand, the farmers can barely recover the costs incurred on their agricultural produce. To cite an example, there is a vast difference between the amount the farmers get for the rubber and the amount the customers have to pay for the tires. The price of rubber has gone down more than 50%

while the cost of tires has moved up sharply. Again, not sharing the profits equitably with all those who contributed to the gains made will have to be termed as stealing

The Seventh and the Ninth Commandments view with concern the belief system which regards money as the highest value. Many do not think it wrong to employ unfair means to accumulate wealth. After all, in their estimation, wealth would provide them security and status in society. Such misguided thinking is sure to land us in spiritual distress. Hence the Bible says that change in our value system is an urgent necessity.

This earth and all its produce are created for all the people in the world. If someone takes more than his share, someone else will be deprived of his due, and this is akin to stealing. Unregulated exploitation of natural resources, resulting in the pollution of air and water, is a kind of robbery of life from future generations. Abuse of the environment has given rise to climate change, global warming and natural disasters. The coming generations will have to bear the brunt of our mindless exploitation of Nature.

Material wealth as such does not enrich or ennoble a person's life. No one takes anything with him when he dies (Lk 12, 15-21). Awareness of this truth will automatically lead to the practice of Social Justice. When money is made the ultimate goal of life, idol worship follows automatically. It is no surprise that Jesus denounced wealth as 'mammon'. Today 'mammon' has infiltrated into several areas of our life, particularly social and political spheres. Sadly, even the religious sphere has not been spared. God is no more the centre of our life. It would seem that 'mammon' has become the object of our worship.

For an increasing number of people, making money has become the goal of whatever they do. This malady is not restricted to the world of business alone. Religious

events such as Festivals, Bible Conventions and Retreats have also fallen into this trap. If generating profits is our chief concern, we are not too far from the realm of idol worship. Unwittingly, we have allowed ‘mammon’ to take the place of God. No wonder that the number of people who devour the houses of widows appears to be on the increase. The Commandment ‘not to steal’ is a call to practise Social Justice and to guard against falling to the allure of the ‘mammon’.

14

Do Not Bear False Witness

The Eighth Commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex 20, 16).

This Commandment might be seen as a negative precept, and very narrow in scope, because in the Old Testament the word “neighbour” applied only to the Israelites. The Gentiles were regarded as strangers. There was a great deal of difference in the way the Israelites and the Gentiles were treated. Moreover, the term “witnessing” implies a court of judgment. Therefore, when one is on trial in a court, one should not bear false witness against another Israelite. The Commandment is liable to be misinterpreted this way. But The Catholic Church views the Commandment in a broader sense. The Church’s official teaching is contained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) § 2464 to 2513).

The Eighth Commandment, sound negative as it may in tone, covers a wide range of subjects just like several other Commandments. The Command ‘not to lie’ signifies merely the boundary line. The real purpose of the Commandment is to safeguard the truth. The ultimate goal is unconditional commitment to truth. Here are the words of Jesus himself: “*Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8, 31-32).* Truth serves as the foundation of a just society and makes people feel free. Hence everyone has the responsibility to seek the truth, to speak

the truth and to live the truth. Where truth is compromised, freedom is endangered and slavery is revived.

Truth is essential for mutual trust, the basis of all social life. People in a society require the conviction that what they see and what they hear is truth. When truth is replaced by untruths, evil, injustice and violence rear their ugly heads. The Bible testifies that God had created only the good but the evil entered into the world through a lie.

Man could sojourn with God so long as he was committed to God and was obedient to His commands. This was made amply clear in the very beginning. *“You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die”* (Gen 2, 16-17). But Satan managed to deceive man. God’s directives were misrepresented and man quite easily fell into the trap. Satan said, *“You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”* (Gen 3, 4-5).

Man disobeyed God and ate of the forbidden fruit. In no time, he was brought under the dominion of evil. This marked the beginning of all evil, including injustice. That is why Satan is depicted as the Lie Incarnate. *“When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies”* (Jn 8, 44).

In the Bible, there are numerous examples of lies being packaged as truths, resulting in grave injustice. Jacob put on sheep skin and pretended to be Esau in order to receive his father’s blessing (Gen 27). Joseph’s brothers lied to their father Jacob and said to him that Joseph had been eaten by wild animals (Gen 37, 32-34). The wife of Potiphar created a false case against Joseph for not submitting to her wish (Gen 39,7-20). Jezebel ordered the kingdom’s officials to give false witness against Naboth in order to cap-

ture his vineyard (1 Kgs 21). The judges accused Susanna that she committed adultery because she did not submit to their wish (Dan 13). Truth has to rule if justice is to prevail in a society.

God chose a people as His own and made a covenant with them so that they would live by the truth and uphold the truth among other people. There is only one truth. God is the Truth. Jesus Christ was the manifestation of the Truth. Pilate asked Jesus *“What is truth?”* (Jn 18, 38). Jesus did not answer the question because He had already provided the answer earlier on when he declared, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me”* (Jn 14, 6). All the prophets, appearing in the Bible, invariably opposed falsehood and bore witness to the truth.

There is a nice little story in circulation. Once, Truth and Lie set out together on a pilgrimage. On the way they found a river. Since it was hot and sunny, they decided to have a swim. They had put aside their clothes on the bank. The Lie finished his bath quickly, got on the bank, put on the clothes of the Truth and went away. When the Truth came up, he could not find his clothes. Since he did not want to put on the clothes of the Lie, he continued his journey without clothes. Thus was born the famous saying, ‘The Naked Truth’.

Whosoever may be the author, it is a beautiful little story. Many examples can be seen, in the Bible and in our society, of lies moving around dressed as “truth”. *“Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, who draw sin as with cart ropes. Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!”* (Is 5, 18-23). Jesus exhorts us to

Speak only what is true. *“Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil”* (Mt 5, 37).

We should speak the truth at all times and in all circumstances, cost what it may, even if our life were at risk. The disciples of Jesus were commanded to carry His gospel message to the ends of the earth. They were to speak out the truth fearlessly about all matters concerning life, the universe and its relationship to man and God. The Commandment that forbids bearing false witness is in reality an injunction to speak the truth, to speak only the truth. This was in effect what evangelization was all about.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC § 2475-2487) lists the offences one can commit against Truth, such as taking a false oath, spreading unfounded rumors, character assassination, pretending to be someone one is not, etc. Such offences are widespread in our society. The Media is particularly guilty of putting out false news and distorting the truth. Lies are shown as facts, and facts as lies.

Today the world is on the brink of a war. It all started with a lie. A plot was hatched to get rid of Saddam Hussein, the ruler of Iraq. To this end, a false story was cooked up and put in circulation. The story was that Saddam Hussein was in possession of deadly chemical weapons of mass destruction, which posed a serious threat to the entire world. Those spreading this story knew full well that it was a lie but the world swallowed it up as a gospel truth. The end result is the rise of dreaded terrorist outfits like IS, which have become a menace to all the people in the world.

The lies spread by the media and their repercussions can be seen all around us. Incidents like lynching to death of persons, accused falsely of possessing beef (cow meat), campaigns which portray other religious groups as anti-national, incarcerating people on charges of blasphemy, im-

posing capital punishment for imagined offences like causing insult to a religion etc., are steadily on the rise. Where truth is not upheld, safety of human life is not assured.

To a lesser extent, advertisements too mislead and harm the general public. Claims of persons having enhanced their beauty by dyeing the hair or by powdering the face are aplenty. Actually, chemicals used to treat the face can cause severe damage to a person's skin. To push up the palm oil sale, misinformation about coconut oil was spread, that it is full of cholesterol. But the truth is otherwise. This has since been demonstrated conclusively to the public. Using pure coconut oil does, in fact, reduce cholesterol. Likewise, harmful new seeds, manure and pesticides are all promoted aggressively by sharing half-truths and hiding their long-term side effects.

“Owner's Pride, and Neighbor's Envy”. A catchy advertisement indeed! What is the purpose of such promotions? No research is required to discover the motivation. Advertisements are aimed at creating newer needs and at encouraging people to keep on purchasing things that they don't really require. Those who cannot afford to buy them are made to feel frustrated. Some would go to any extent, even to the extent of stealing, to possess the advertised products. Such is the sway advertisements hold on the general public. People do not realize that they are being fooled by the media which bear false witness about products and people. There is, therefore, an urgent need to caution people about falling prey to this consumerist propaganda.

With regard to products and things, there are numerous cases where truth is suppressed and lies are spread. It is time to realize that truth alone can set us free and help establish justice on earth. The function of the Eighth Commandment is to inspire commitment to truth. Its implicit teaching is to exhort people to speak the truth and nothing but the truth.

While speaking too, one must exercise prudence. There are things to be kept confidential. This is very much in the spirit of the Eighth Commandment. Recently the Supreme Court has ruled that an individual is not obliged to disclose everything, but has every right to keep certain matters to himself. Truth should shine forth in our words and deeds.

15

Pilgrimage - Temptations

“Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (Ex 32, 1).

The Promised Land is a symbol of a setting, of a time and a place, which promises social justice to all. The Bible calls it “**The Kingdom of God**” or the “**Rule of God**”. When God is the king and His will is the rule, justice is guaranteed to all. The Ten Commandments provide the required basis for the promotion of justice. However, the existence of the Commandments alone may not suffice. Cooperation and sincere efforts of the people are essential for establishing justice on earth. Much requires to be done in the way that a long journey was needed to reach the Promised Land.

The people of Israel wandered through the wilderness where there were no roads, shade or a place to rest. Ideally, every person, and every society, should have been through a desert like experience. Dealing with the sort of hardships and temptations the Israelites faced would be an invaluable lesson. The sacred authors have provided us a fair account of the events to serve as a guide in our own pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God. Their failures, in particular, hold forth many lessons. Conscious effort may be needed to avoid the blunders that they committed. Thereon, social justice that God desires is likely to become a reality.

Some of the major temptations the people of Israel

struggled with will be analyzed next. The incidents narrated might sound like fiction but they are regarded as historical events. They were meant to serve as a guide to the coming generations.

1. An Idol to Worship

People were happy to see the back of the miseries of slavery in Egypt. They marched out of Egypt with great hopes. They saw the miracles God performed along the way. The sea gave way to land for the Israelites to walk through while the Egyptian army which chased them drowned in the sea. During the day the cloud gave them shade and at night a pillar of fire provided them the light. They were fed with Manna from heaven and their thirst quenched with water produced from rock by God. Wind brought them quails to eat. At the end they reached the foot of Mount Horeb, also called Sinai.

Moses went up the mountain to speak with God and he did not return for many days. Not knowing what had happened to Moses, the people approached Aaron and made a request. *“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, “Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (Ex 32,1).*

The people believed that it was God who guided them. They wanted God to continue to guide them. But who is the God? They wanted a god they could see and carry around, and they demanded that the god should go ahead of them. Even though they said that they wanted the god to guide them, in reality they wanted to go the way they chose. The god they wanted to worship was their own creation. Their demand to Aaron to make them gods proves the point.

Even as the people were busy making gods, Moses was on the mountain receiving the Commandments from the true God. We can see the conflict between the revealed will of God and the selfish desires of man. God wants justice for all. This is possible only if people live and act according to His will. But people chose to create gods of their own. Rather than submitting to the will of God, they wanted the gods to act according to their whims and fancies. Spirituality was turned upside down.

The High Priest, who was appointed to guide the people through the path God had revealed, himself opts to make idols for them to worship. Without deliberating carefully about the request people had made, Aaron decided to act on their demand. *“Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me”. So, all the people took off the rings of gold which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made a molten calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Ex 32, 2-4).*

Instead of guiding the people according to the will of the true God Aaron seemed to support their acclamation that they were led out of Egypt by the gods they had made. Aaron the priest led the worship and the celebration. *“When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD”. And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play” (Ex 32, 5-6).*

By reporting that it was the first priest of Israel who led the people astray, the Bible sounds a serious warning. When questioned about his actions by Moses, Aaron made

lame excuses. There was no way he could evade the responsibility for encouraging the first sin of Israel, worship of the golden calf at Sinai. There are authorities like Aaron who misguide the people under the mistaken notion that they are helping them by fulfilling their unwise requests.

Straying from the right path has its origin in the faulty thinking that worship is conducting certain rituals with precision. Forgetting that God desires actions guided by mercy and justice, some mistakenly focus on ceremonies and celebrations. This is nothing but idol worship. Aaron's actions have thrown up this invaluable lesson.

Various aspects of idol worship have been discussed already. One common error is that a devotee sees God as one who would fulfill what is asked for in exchange for the worship he offers. In this perspective, religion becomes a sort of commerce to obtain what one wants. Worship is used as a means to obtain favors. No religion in the world is free of such mistaken notions. Aaron asked and got the ornaments to make the calf. Today many religious leaders act just like Aaron did. But what did Moses do? *“Took the calf which they had made, and burnt it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it upon the water, and made the people of Israel drink it”* (Ex 32, 20).

When will another Moses come down the mountain again? There are idols to be destroyed and attitudes to be altered. The Commandments of the Covenant will be our guide in carrying out this task.

2. Dissatisfaction – Gluttony – Obsession

Laziness was another temptation people fell into, on their way to the Promised Land. They had not had any sense of satisfaction. They were unwilling to take any risks. Instead, they kept on complaining all the time. No shade on the way. No water to drink. No food to eat. Bread

and water lack taste. Their murmuring and complaints kept increasing. They were tired of the journey and the end did not seem anywhere within sight. They had many more miles to go; more hardships to be endured. Dissatisfaction gave way to disappointment, and to protests. The people turned against Moses and Aaron. They began to say that the security of slavery was preferable to the hardships in the desert. They wanted to elect a new leader who would guide them back to Egypt. It was developing into a revolt, a huge crisis. A new big temptation!

Initially, when they began their journey to the Promised Land, they were mighty happy. They were happy to flee from Egypt and from the horrors of slavery. They moved under God's protection. During the day they had a cloud for shade and during the night a pillar of fire as light. Their joys knew no bounds. But, as the days passed, their enthusiasm began to wane. Happiness gave way to disaffection. Complaints piled up against the leaders, Moses and Aaron. Manna, which was at first their delicacy, started to feel tasteless and nauseating. *"The rabble that was among them had a strong craving; and the people of Israel also wept again, and said, "O that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (Num 11, 4-6). "For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food" (Num 21, 5).*

In the early days, when they craved for food to satiate their hunger, Manna had seemed a heavenly food. But surprisingly, the situation changed. The people of Israel also wept again, and said, *"O that we had meat to eat!"* (Num 11, 4). Though they had all the food they needed, they wanted a different food. They wanted delicacies. Instead of being happy with the food God had provided, they

craved for special food. God's response to their complaints carries precious lessons about social justice.

Hearing their unjustified complaints, God spoke to them through Moses. *“And say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wailed in the hearing of the LORD, saying, ‘If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt.’ Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall not eat one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the LORD who is among you, and have wept before him, saying, ‘Why did we come forth out of Egypt?’”* (Num 11, 18-20).

Everything happened as the Lord had said. Quails came by the wind sent by God. *“It brought quails from the sea, and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and about two cubits above the face of the earth. While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD smote the people with a very great plague. Therefore, the name of that place was called Kibrothhattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving”* (Num 11, 31-34).

Kibrothhattaavah is a reminder that greed and ingratitude are paths leading to perdition, to a premature end in the tomb. Events such as the ones at Kibrothhattaavah keep happening all the time, yet people fail to recognize the warnings. This is true not only about food but about several other things like clothes, homes, comforts, vehicles and celebrations.

Strange as it may be, on one side, people fall sick due to overeating while millions go hungry without food for

days on end. The rich are busy constructing huge palaces for themselves while millions are homeless. We know of a 15-storied skyscraper in Mumbai which is meant for the use of a 3-member family. Worse, we see this cult of greed among those professing to serve God. Indifference and greed cannot contribute to building a just society but will ferry us to a place of tombs, Kibrothhattaavah style. This is the clear lesson emerging from the events in the desert during the Exodus.

Power-Hunger

Love of power was yet another of the temptations the Israelites fell prey to. It was God who appointed Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt and Aaron was made his spokesperson. Seeing the power, the leaders possessed and the positions they held, some were seized with ambition and they began to long for authority. Moses' own brother and sister gave in to this temptation. *“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman; and they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the LORD heard it”* (Num 12, 1-2).

Lust for power was noticeable even in the appointment of helpers who were to hear the complaints of people and to pass verdicts. When the chosen 70 were being conferred the spirit of God, two others outside the Tent seemed also to receive the same spirit. Joshua, the helper of Moses, could not reconcile to it. He said to Moses, *“My lord Moses, forbid them”* (Num 11, 28). But Moses was glad that more people were receiving God's spirit. Moses chided Joshua. *“Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!”* (Num 11, 29).

Hunger for power was seen with regard to priesthood also. A protest was held against Moses and Aaron by Korah and companions who tried hard to capture the leadership. But the revolt and the greed for power did not find favor with God. These incidents are narrated in detail in Num 16. Miriam who spoke against Moses was afflicted with leprosy. Korah and his supporters who tried to capture priesthood were swallowed alive by the earth (Num 16, 31-36).

Greed for power cannot be ticked off as a phenomenon peculiar to the time of Moses. Lust for power is very much alive today, in different spheres, political, social and religious. This is what prompted Pope Francis to speak firmly that there is no place in the Church of Christ for people who hunger for power. From the village to the National levels, people vie for positions and they are prepared to do anything to achieve power. For them, power is a sure way to amass wealth, to hold high positions and to lead a life of luxury. In such a situation, how could there be social justice! Jesus of Nazareth has taught us all a very different lesson that power and position are to be employed to serve people. *‘For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve’* (Mt 20, 28). Will He come again to drive home this truth to us all?

4. Fear

Another temptation people had to deal with was fear. Being well aware that they were the chosen people of God, the 12 tribes prepared themselves for war. As they marched to the Promised Land, the Arc of the Covenant moved ahead of them. The cloud of the Lord showed them the way (Num 10). They followed the cloud with joy, but all on a sudden, things took a different turn. Their hopes were dashed to the ground. Courage deserted them. Fear seized their hearts.

The 12 tribal representatives were sent from Kadesh-Barnea where the people had set up their tents in the desert of Paran. Moses had deputed them to spy on the Promised Land. The representatives returned back, after 40 days, but with a disheartening report. Only Joshua and Caleb brought back some positive news. This was what was reported to Moses. *“We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, “Let us go up at once, and occupy it; for we are well able to overcome it”* (Num 12, 27-30).

As proof for the prosperity of the land, they had brought back grapes and fruits. The ideal thing to do was to join hands and to capture the land. Joshua and Caleb supported the idea but the remaining 10 opposed it outright. *“So, they brought to the people of Israel an evil report of the land which they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone, to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are men of great stature. And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim); and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them”* (Num 13, 32-33).

Hearing all this, everyone grew scared and they cried all night. They refused to set out for the war. They had almost reached the borders of the Promised Land but they turned back and wandered through the desert for forty years. Sad to say, no one of that generation ever set foot on the Promised Land. They all died in the desert itself. It was the people of the next generation, led by Joshua, who could enter into the Promised Land.

Is there a lesson here about social justice? About the

Promised Land? Perhaps, yes. The Promised Land has no space for cowards and the lazy. To be worthy to enter the Kingdom of God, one has to work hard, suffer pains and be willing to take risks. Those who turn back out of fear forfeit their right to the Promised Land, and that too in a permanent way

The lesson is valid for all times. When the salvation history reaches its completion, the first ones to be discarded will be the cowards. *“But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death”* (Rev. 21,8).

A believer in Christ cannot remain a coward. Only those who are ready to give up their lives could follow Jesus. Followers of Christ are not required to kill anybody, or to take any such needless risks. Just the contrary. They are to be willing to sacrifice their life for the sake of others. Jesus proclaimed, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (Mt 5, 10). *“The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force”* (Lk 16,16).

To build a just society, one has to be willing to work with hope and courage. Failure is a certainty if we step back, sensing the obstacles. Justice will be established if we trust in God and go forward, obeying the Commandments. This truth is apparent in the events surrounding the journey of the people of Israel and the temptations they had faced on the way.

Those who trust in God will know no fear. The final victory will be theirs in their fight against evil, just as David won the battle against Goliath. Those who pray with

faith would see the obstacles melt away like a mountain of wax (Mk 11, 23). God does great things through small people and humble communities. Establishment of justice is, in the last analysis, the handiwork of God. What we are required to do is to co-operate sincerely and to work in alignment with God's designs.

16

Valley of Achor, Monument of Corruption

“Joshua and all Israel with him took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver and the mantle and the bar of gold, and his sons and daughters, and his oxen and asses and sheep, and his tent, and all that he had; and they brought them up to the Valley of Achor. And Joshua said, “Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD brings trouble on you today”. And all Israel stoned him with stones; they burned them with fire, and stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day; then the LORD turned from his burning anger. Therefore, to this day the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor” (Jos 7, 24 – 26).

Important lessons about social justice can be learnt from this primitive, frightening incident. An entire chapter with 26 verses has been devoted to its narration. To uncover the lessons, what is required is a study of the incident and its historical background, keeping in view the theological outlook of the sacred authors.

The sacred author relates the entry of the people into Canaan, the Promised Land, in the form of a festive procession. The priests, carrying the Ark of the Covenant, symbolizing the presence of God, went first, accompanied by Levites with trumpets and musical instruments. The people of Israel followed them next. The swollen river Jordan parted and a path appeared in front of them. Through the dry land, the people walked across the river. They were re-

minded of the parting of the Red Sea at the start of the Exodus. The strong walls of Jericho collapsed and the people could easily enter the city. Thus, the path to Canaan was thrown open to them. However, despite all these victories, the Israelites suffered an unexpected defeat.

The event is narrated in Jos 7-8. Ai was a relatively small town. Joshua sent 3000 soldiers to capture it but they suffered a crushing defeat. Soldiers who retreated were killed by the enemy. Hearing of all this, the people grew very scared. This was their first defeat after leaving Egypt. Their fear grew worse when the news became public, and they began to worry whether the Canaanites would join force to fight them. Joshua himself was rattled. He prostrated before God with a broken heart, trembling feet and weakened hands, and poured out his fears and anxieties. God, in response, disclosed to him the cause of their defeat.

The Israelites suffered defeat, not because God's hand had become shorter or because the soldiers of Ai were stronger. None of these was the cause for their defeat. The reason was some persons among the Israelites had violated God's commandment, by taking forbidden goods, hiding them and were lying about them. God had also suggested to Joshua a way to find the culprits.

Accordingly, Joshua gathered all the people together. Achan, son of Carmi, son of Zerahites, son of Zabdi of the tribe of Judah was found to be the guilty one. On knowing who the culprit was, Joshua spoke with Achan lovingly and with deep concern, *"My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and render praise to him; and tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me"* (Jos 7, 19). Achan was asked to confess the crime that had brought about the defeat of the people. Confessing the truth would glorify God. The people would realize that they failed not because God was not powerful or had cared less, but because of the

sin one of them had committed. Misunderstandings, if any, will be removed. All this would amount to an admission and a glorification of God's power, mercy, and care.

Achan confessed his sin. *“Achan answered Joshua, ‘Of a truth I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, then I coveted them, and took them; and behold, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath’* (Jos 7, 20-21).

By telling the truth Achan glorified God as Joshua had explained to him. However, this was not the end of the story. Joshua traced the forbidden goods and had them burned to ashes. Besides, Achan's tent and his belongings inside were brought to the valley. Achan and his family were stoned to death. Everything became a burned offering to God. A huge monument was erected over the ashes with stones which could still be seen. What is the message the sacred author is trying to convey to us through all this narration? Why is the story told in such great details? The answers are to be found in the prevalent attitudes about stolen goods.

In those days, wars were fought for various purposes. The winning party would plunder the defeated country. They would take away people, animals and things. The defeated nation received no protection. All the rights rested with the victorious nation. However, no one other than the leader or the king could take possession of the goods of the defeated nation. Jericho was defeated by the power of God and so everything in Jericho was sacrificed as a holocaust to God. All the things, animals and people would be burned and the sweet smell would rise like incense and, in this way, everything would be made an offering to God.

The plundered goods belonged to God. Taking anything from them would be regarded as stealing. It is against this custom that Achan and his actions are to be understood. No one could question in what way God benefitted by the burning of the goods, the clothes, the gold and the silver. That was how the law stood at that time. Actually, there was a basis to the law. The Bible itself provides a glimpse of the beliefs and convictions behind its origin.

The offer of sacrifice is an acknowledgement of the ultimate authority of God and an acceptance that all that we have are gratuitous gifts from Him. No one is to take anything which is set aside for God. Doing so will be a sin against God.

There was yet another angle to Achan's sin. What is set aside for God belongs to the entire community and cannot be used for personal needs. In the period that followed, when the Temple had been built and services were held, whatever was offered to God was utilized for the needs of those who serve in the Temple. Anything that was left over was given to the poor. That was the law. This applied to tithes as well. All these traditions grew over a period of time. The poor were regarded as the people of God. The poor included the needy, the slaves, the landless foreigners, orphans and the widows. Their protection was taken over by God. This was the reason why God called the slaves in Egypt as His own people and made a Covenant with them.

To sum up, what is offered to God is common property and ultimately, they belong to the poor. Any one usurping the common property for personal use will be guilty in the eyes of God. Doing so would amount to a grave injustice. The people who settled in the Promised Land became victims of such injustice. This is recorded in the Bible. The prophets spoke against it all along unequivocally and in a passionate manner.

The valley of Achor and the monument therein stand as a testimony of the punishment inflicted on those who dared to usurp common property. When the Israelites settled down in the Promised Land, God called their attention to the serious consequences of going against the laws of God. The severe punishment was meant to serve as a deterrent. Nobody should usurp common goods for personal use. Expensive mantle, gold and silver might hold strong attractions, but surrendering to the temptation would invite disaster. This was the intended lesson behind the narration of the stoning and burning of an entire family.

Monuments are generally erected to commemorate victorious or joyous events of the past. But the monument in the Valley of Achor was not a symbol of pride or joy, but a sign of disgrace and death, aimed at evoking salvific fear. Desire to gather wealth should not degenerate into actions of injustice. The monument in the valley of Achor is a stark reminder of what could befall anyone tempted to act otherwise.

History is studded with numerous monuments of this kind. Surprisingly, people fail to notice them. Sad to say, even monuments signifying victories of the past, might have connections with corruption, violence and injustice. Often enough, someone would seize what belongs to another and celebrate it as a victory and build a monument as a memorial. Naturally, such monuments are to be regarded, not as symbols of victory, but as memorials of the injustices heaped on men by men.

Another important lesson the story of Achan carries is that the crime of one person affects the destiny of an entire community. No action of ours, good or bad, is merely limited to our individual, personal life. The influence of our actions spreads far and wide, to impact several others, particularly those belonging to our own family and society.

We are all intrinsically connected with each other.

Words and deeds, and even thoughts of a single individual will influence an entire society, for better or for worse. We share a collective responsibility. Our destinies are intertwined. God asked Cain, “Where is your brother Abel” and Cain answered, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” Achor Valley reminds us that we are all brothers and each other’s keepers and cannot evade responsibility for our mutual welfare. No one should dare to play the game of Cain and hope to get away with it.

In the final analysis, the story of Achan is a warning against perpetuating injustice. Crime of any kind would call down punishment. Bible warns us that we are not to take the unending mercy of God for granted. Justice has to be done in all matters, at all times and at all costs.

Many of the monuments in our country remind us of the stones gathered in the Valley of Achan. They have been constructed with the sweat, the tears and the blood of the poor. It is becoming common that seeds of hatred are sown in the hearts of people and they are urged to kill and to destroy their opponents and people of other communities. Many of the so called martyrs’ monuments raise the doubt if they are not visible signs of atrocities perpetrated against the poor, the weak and unorganized people by powerful political parties. Surely some monuments have to be erected to perpetuate the memory of the leaders who fill the hearts of the youth with the venom of hatred and send them out into the street to massacre the innocent and destroy public property, as a warning of what one should not do. These would surely be the replica of Achan’s monument in the valley of Achor.

Those who preach social justice but provoke people to take to arms to fight against injustice should visit the Valley of Achan to recognize the contradictions in their own

lives. Anyone who misappropriates what belongs to another is on a shaky ground, and risks incurring the punishment of Achan. Social workers and political leaders who usurp common property are offenders of the worst kind, as far as upholding justice is concerned.

The Valley of Achan has applications to several of our religious practices as well. An honest audit is to be carried out regarding the offerings collected in the name of God, tithes and other gifts, to determine how they are being utilized. When such money, meant for the poor, is used to build big churches or to beautify church towers, are we not moving away from the right path? If someone misappropriates a portion of what is spent on construction, would that not amount to stealing? In all such situations, questions arise whether we are also treading the path Achan had taken.

The story of Achan has not lost its relevance to our times. But strangely the so called “holy” men and women do not recognize the message contained in the story. So long as those in power continue to be greedy and selfish, it is clear that the domination of Mammon has not ended. The Commandment is clear. Give to God what belongs to God. What belongs to God belongs to His people, the poor. Therefore, let us give to the poor what belongs to the poor. That is the message echoing from the Valley of Achor.

17

Bloody Fields

“Thus says the LORD, “Have you killed, and also taken possession?” And you shall say to him, “Thus says the LORD: “In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood” (1 Kgs 21, 19).

There is a very interesting event narrated in 1Kgs 21. Ahab, king of Israel, had a simple desire. He wanted to buy the vineyard that was near his summer home and plant a vegetable garden there. There was nothing evil about this desire. He was ready to pay the amount desired by the owner of the vineyard. If the owner insisted on another field in exchange for this one, the king was ready to do that as well. As a king, what else could he offer?

The owner of the vineyard, Naboth, was not ready to sell the property. Nor did he agree to an exchange. This angered and, even more, saddened the king. He returned to the palace in an upset mood, and went to bed straight away. Queen Jezebel approached him and asked him the reason for his unease. On knowing the reason, the queen laughed it up and resolved to solve the problem. She could not believe that the king could not acquire the land near his palace to have a vegetable garden. She assured her husband that the vineyard would be his, the next day. She cheered him up and coaxed him to have his meal.

Queen Jezebel, the daughter of the King of Tyre, did not know why Naboth had refused to sell his property. In truth, the action of Naboth was that of a true Israelite. For

him the land was the gift of God, inherited from his forefathers. It was not a property that can be bought and sold. He could stay there, farm it and be buried there when he died. The land had been in the care of his family for generations. *“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me”* (Lev 25, 23).

The land had been handed down from generation to generation since the time of Joshua. This was how the people of the day could participate in the inheritance God had given them and be a part of the people of God. Any break from the inheritance would be tantamount to being cast out of the presence of God. The queen, however, who did not know the theology of the land, acted according to the way she was accustomed to, as a normal member of a royal family.

With an order stamped with the seal of the king, the guards went over to Jezreel. The following day they fasted as specified in the order. Towards the afternoon the people assembled and Naboth was seated as the chief guest. Two men came forward and bore false witness against Naboth. On oath they accused him of having blasphemed against God and spoken against the king. Based on the false accusation, the verdict was passed. They took Naboth and his family to his vineyard and stoned them to death. Then, as per the custom, his property was confiscated and was added to the royal treasury. Thus, without paying a penny, Ahab got possession of the vineyard he so desired.

Those who bore false witness and those who stoned the family to death knew full well that Naboth was innocent and that they were stoning innocent people to death. However, no one dared to challenge the order of the king or to stage any protest. A pool of blood of the innocent man was left in the vineyard and the dogs came and licked it.

This was the mode of punishment prescribed at that time in the order of the court of justice in Israel.

Ahab ruled Israel from 874 to 853 B.C. The story of Naboth is not to be viewed only as a tale of Ahab's depravity or of his wife Jezebel. Rather the story provides a fair picture of the distressing situation of the times brought about by successive rulers of Israel. When people of Israel entered the Promised Land, they were a people committed to justice. The monument in the Valley of Achan was in fact a sign of their heightened sense of justice. But matters deteriorated gradually to such a level that persons like Ahab could hold the reins of power.

The people of Israel possessed nothing as they had served merely as slaves in Egypt. God liberated them and settled them securely in the Promised Land to live as the people of God. God desired that they should lead a life committed to truth, justice, mercy and love and thereby bear witness to God before the other peoples of the earth. They should be the light of the world so that through them the whole world would come to know the true God Almighty. Unfortunately, that is not what happened.

Joshua had divided the Promised Land among the tribes based on the number of families in each tribe (Joshua 13-21). After the death of Joshua, people lived in small groups in the land of Canaan for almost 150 years (B.C. 1200 – 1030). When they faced dangers and obstacles, God gave them leaders, who were called Judges. The Judges protected the people from their enemies.

But gradually people began to feel that the system did not fully meet their needs. They also began to worship other gods along with Yahweh who liberated them from Egypt. The leaders became corrupt and lacked integrity. In the meantime, the enemies grew more and more powerful. At the end, the Ark of the Covenant itself was captured by

the Philistines (1 Sam 4-5). People began to think that to continue to remain in the Promised Land a new system was required. Towards this end, they approached Samuel, the leader of the time and the last of the Judges.

The people said to Samuel, *“Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations”* (1 Sam 8, 5). Samuel was not happy with their request as he was aware that the “people of Israel” was not like the other people. God chose them as His own people and so their desire to be like the other people would be equal to rejecting the true God.

But God asked Samuel to anoint a king as the people had asked. *“The LORD said to Samuel, “Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds which they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, hearken to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them”* (1 Sam 8, 7-9). God’s injunction to Samuel clearly shows that the people were lacking in faith and in gratitude to God. Even so, God deigned to respect their freedom and to grant them their desire.

All the same, God asked Samuel to warn the people about the implications of their desire and their stubborn demand. *“Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking a king from him. He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ... and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.*

He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants.... He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day, you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day” (1 Sam 8, 10-18). But the warnings fell on deaf ears and they did not retract their demand for a king. Thus, for the first time the people Israel had a king, called “Saul” which means “got by asking”.

The Bible presents two opposing views about monarchy. God’s discourse to Samuel is all about the demerits of the rule of kings. But the other view is that kings are the merciful gifts of God. Both the views have their basis in historical events. Monarchy was helpful for Israel while at the same time people also suffered many hardships at the hands of the rulers.

Under the rule of kings Israel achieved a status equal to that of several other nations. King David gave them a sense of security. The empire expanded over a period of time and the people grew proud of their kingdom. During the time of Solomon, Israel became an inter-national power which had business dealings with many countries. Israel had grown so prosperous that the Pharaoh of Egypt was willing to give his daughter in marriage to a member of the Israelite royal family.

Centralized rule and worship enhanced the spirit of solidarity in the kingdom and people began to dream of a bright future. There were prophesies which proclaimed that the Thorne of David would last forever and that the Messiah would be known as the son of David. The writing of the salvation history, the Bible, began during the time of King David and of King Solomon. Thus, from an objective point view, monarchy was a great success. However, this was only part of the story.

There was another view of monarchy which revealed the darker side of the rule of kings. It was Samuel himself who had enumerated the dangers. When people asked for a king, all they wanted was protection from enemies. To a large extent, they were provided protection. But the price they had to paid was huge. Saul was the first ruler who was elected and anointed by God. Initially, he managed to lead the army with skill and defeated the enemy. But when the kingship got into his head, he began to falter. He forgot that the victory in war was a gift of God and that he was to lead the people in accordance with the will of God.

When challenged by Goliath, Saul momentarily lost his balance. He grew confused and was unable to distinguish friend from foe. The second half of his rule was spent in hunting down David, his own body guard. Saul was more worried about making the line of his rule secure than protecting the kingdom from enemies. For the fault of protecting his opponent, Saul had no qualms about putting an entire community of priests to death (1 Sam 22, 6-23). He had been anointed to protect his people but his sword was used to shed their blood. The killing of the priests of Nob was just one example among many.

Saul's death sentence was pronounced by Samuel in the presence of the medium woman of Endor. *"The LORD has done to you as he spoke by me; for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand, and given it to your neighbor, David. Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD, and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day"* (1 Sam 28, 17-18).

After eating the supper prepared by the medium woman, Saul journeyed to his final end. The very next day Saul and his three sons were killed by the Philistines on the hills of Gilboa. The rule of kings came to a sad end. However,

like the phoenix bird rising from its own ashes, Israel too rose from its failures and developed into a great empire under the leadership of King David who was strong and courageous.

David killed Goliath with a stone from his sling. The body guard, who had wandered in the wilderness, fearing Saul, gave protection to many (1 Sam 22, 1-2). After the death of Saul, David returned and became the king of Judah and then, of all the 12 tribes of Israel. Through a clever strategy, he defeated all the enemies. He captured Jerusalem and made it the capital of his kingdom. By bringing the Ark of the Covenant in the city, David made Jerusalem the religious capital also.

Under King David, Israel became a powerful kingdom and reached the zenith of its glory. The enemies were either defeated or were affiliated through treaties. God blessed David abundantly as he was holy and remained faithful to the Commandments of God. He received a promise from God that a son from his lineage would occupy the throne at all times (2 Sam 7).

Despite all the victories, the period of the rule of King David was far from being glorious. In his attempt to enlarge the kingdom, he had to fight several wars. When the soldiers were in the battle field, the king chose to remain in the Palace. Even after coming to know that the woman he was in love with was the wife of his soldier, he did not hesitate to take her as his wife. He grew in his power but strayed away from God. He tried to make Bathsheba's pregnancy appear to have been caused by her husband Uriah, but when his plans failed, he did not hesitate to have Uriah killed (2 Sam 11). If all this could happen during the reign of a king, known to be holy and just, what would be the situation during the rule of unholy kings?

The king, responsible to establish justice, acted against

justice. The one who was supposed to protect his people himself destroyed family relationships in his kingdom. The king took the life of the soldier who was fighting to save his country from the enemy. Where, then, can we find salvation? How can we expect justice when the seat of justice itself is tainted with injustice? The warning of Samuel became a reality. *“That day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day”* (1 Sam 8, 18).

The consequences of an unjust life became evident during the life time of King David himself. Because of adultery and murder, he lost his moral power among the people. He could not guide his own family. His sons, born of his many different wives, began to fight with each other out of jealousy, lust and hatred. Finally, David himself had to flee into the wilderness, fearing his own son. David is an example of the frailties and dangers of kingship, if the ruler loses his way.

A king has to bear in mind that he too is governed by God’s Commandments. Injustice shows up automatically when the ruler of the land himself deviates from the path of justice. From the time the rule of kings began with Saul and David to when Ahab became the ruler, much blood of the people of Israel had been shed in the fields and vineyards of the land. People were filled with fear and had come to believe that their lives were at risk if they protested.

The history of Kingship as told by the Deuteronomistic historian shows that monarchy cannot provide justice to individuals or to societies. In particular, monarchs who spurn the Commandments of God can never be models of justice. The stories of Bathsheba, Uriah and the family of Naboth are not isolated events, which happen rarely. In fact, such incidents occur even today with greater regularity.

When the Government initiates steps to acquire land

for dams, for industries or for roads, poor people get uprooted from their ancestral homes and lands. They are literally thrown into the streets, not having even a little hut for themselves. Such Naboths keep wailing and crying from different parts of the country. Even after years of deprivation, they continue to wallow in poverty.

As the rule of kings grew powerful, discrimination crept into the society. The king and his associates reserved the higher positions for themselves and pushed the ordinary citizens to the lower ranks. The land was turned into a property that could be sold or bought. With this change, all the land ended up in the hands of a few and a vast majority were rendered land-less. Left with no other security, they turned into slaves in their own Land. People who had escaped from the slavery in Egypt were back as slaves once again. The clock had turned a full circle. The Empire they had painstakingly built ignoring God had become a world of torture and torment. It seemed as if justice had been exiled and injustice had been installed in its place.

God who had led the Exodus event started to challenge the corrupt institutions through powerful prophets. This will be the subject of our discussion next.

18

Cannibals

“You who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin from off my people, and their flesh from off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron” (Mi 3, 2-3).

God liberated the suffering people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt and settled them in the Promised Land so that they could live as the people of God with dignity. At Mount Sinai, God made a Covenant with them and accepted them as His own people. God willed that their life, rooted in truth, justice, mercy and love should become a living witness to God before the other peoples in the world. Israel was to be the light of the world and through them the whole world should come to know the true God, the God Almighty. In this way, all the peoples of the world would come to perceive God as their Father, and they would also accept each other as brothers and sisters. Peace and harmony will reign on earth. Such was the great project of God as revealed in the Bible.

However, justice was out of reach for the majority due to the social structures created by those who settled in the Promised Land. The land that was given to all, ended up in the hands of a few. Equality envisioned by God turned into a mirage as a small elite seized all the high positions. The kings exploited the people instead of protecting them. There was no security to the poor, with regard to life and property. Uriah lost his life and his wife. Naboth was deprived of his vineyard and all his family members were

massacred. It was in such a situation that Nathan and Elijah appeared on the scene, as if in answer to the cry of the oppressed. They began challenging the rulers who had committed those heinous crimes.

Moses, Samuel, Nathan and Elijah are the early models of prophets. Later there came a series of great prophets as champions of justice who raised their voice like roaring lions in the name of God, against injustice. Thanks to their work, Israel turned out to be a nation very different from other nations. Prophets were sent by God to reveal the will of God and to teach the people to live in accordance with the Commandments of God.

The Prophets who have books in their names were called writing prophets and those with no books are called non-writing prophets. Among the writing prophets, there are four Major Prophets and twelve Minor Prophets. The period 760 to 500 B.C. could be termed as the time of the Prophets. The first of the writing prophets is Amos who preached in 760 B.C. in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Amos is known as the Prophet of Social Justice. The prophets, who came immediately after him, borrowed from his ideas and vocabulary. Right after Amos, Hosea (750-720) was seen preaching in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

At about the same time, (750-700 B.C.) Prophets Isaiah and Micah preached in the Southern Kingdom, Judah. In 721 B.C., Israel disappeared from the map of the world as Assyria captured Israel and exiled most of the people. Then on, Israel was limited to Judah, the Southern Kingdom. In 587 B.C., Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem and exiled the king and the people to Babylon and made them slaves. About 40 years prior to the Babylonian exile, Prophet Jeremiah (626 B.C.) began to preach in Jerusalem. He had the misfortune of witnessing all the disasters he had warned them about. Around the same time, four more

prophets, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Obadiah, appeared in Jerusalem and called the people to repentance.

The Emperor of Babylon had conquered Judah in 598 and took thousands of people captives to Babylon and imposed heavy taxes. The Prophet Ezekiel was one of those deported. After a few years Judah rebelled, stopped paying taxes and prepared to defend itself with the help of Egypt. But Babylonian army returned in 588, laid siege to Jerusalem. Egypt did not come to help. Finally, after the siege of over a year Jerusalem was captured, its walls demolished, palaces and temple burned down and many more people deported as captives to Babylon. The prophetic activity of Ezekiel took place, mostly during this period of ten years between the two deportations.

What God demanded of the people through all these prophets was justice. By going through their teachings, we can recognize the lessons God gives us about Social Justice.

Prophet - Seer

Formerly a prophet was known as “ro’e” which means one who sees. Prophetic vision was different from the thinking of ordinary people. They could see the future and predict what was going to happen, but that is not all with vision. The visions of the prophets were very profound and conveyed deep meanings. They had the ability to look at events from God’s point of view, because they were guided by God. They could see and understand what God was revealing through events in history. Vision does not mean an unusual way of seeing, but a deep understanding. They had profound insights about God’s plan for the people. They could not but highlight the contradictions and the injustices they perceived in the society. This was yet another aspect of the prophetic mission.

Prophet – Spokes-person of God

The word “Prophet” comes from the Greek word “Prophemi” which means ‘to speak for another (for God)’. From this verb is derived the word “Prophetes” which means “One who speaks for another”. The original Hebrew term “Nabi” has a similar meaning, ‘one who speaks out’. Prophet is one who is called to speak the message of God truthfully and with courage. The prophets proclaim, not their own personal feelings or thoughts, but the instructions of God. A close scrutiny of their teachings about “Social Justice”, throws up three important points:

- a) Severe criticism about the injustice in the society
- b) Call to repentance.
- c) The terrible punishment awaiting those who do not repent.

Criticism of Injustice in the Society

From Isaiah to Malachi, all the sixteen writing prophets spoke firmly against the prevailing injustice in the society. The first of the prophets was Amos who was known as the “Prophet of Justice”. He preached in 760 B.C. in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, largely in Samaria, the capital of Israel and in Bethel, the nation’s religious center. His work lasted only a few months but his words resembled the roaring of a Lion. The authorities were rattled when they heard him speak. They forbade him from preaching and tried to suppress his voice altogether. Tradition has it that he was finally put to death by the authorities.

Amos thunders: *“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are in the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’ The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they*

shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. And you shall go out through the breaches, every one straight before her; and you shall be cast forth into Harmon, says the LORD” (Amos 4, 1-3). The wives of the high society people were addressed as “*cows of Bashan*”. Bashan was the best grazing field and the cattle there were fat and fit. The prophet warned them that they faced the same fate as what awaited the fattened animals, getting readied for banquets.

“Hear this word which I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel: “Fallen, no more to rise, is the virgin Israel; forsaken on her land, with none to raise her up” (Amos 5, 1-2). During the time of Jeroboam II (783-743 B.C.), Israel was at the peak of its prosperity. It was to such a nation Amos spoke so sternly. From the point of view of ordinary citizens, the nation was in a state of great prosperity and glory. But, seeing it with the eyes of God, Amos could foresee total destruction. He also explained the reasons for the impending disaster.

“For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes -- they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted; a man and his father go in to the same maiden, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar upon garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined” (Amos 2, 6-8).

The People liberated by God are now being auctioned out as animals and that too, for the price of a pair of shoes. Mention of the shoes signifies that the slave markets were operated with the approval of the ruling parties. Exchanging slippers was equivalent to signing on a sealed paper (Ru 4, 7). Those who were sold as slaves on account of

the loans they could not repay did not have any family or rights. The point that father and son go to the same maiden speaks of the misery the girls sold as slaves had to endure.

The precepts of the Covenant God gave to Israel ensured justice for all, especially for those at the bottom of the social pyramid. Unfortunately, those laws were abolished and replaced by royal edicts which guaranteed excessive protection to the rich and made it possible for them to exploit the poor. The court system was meant to provide justice to those who had suffered injustice. But corruption had poisoned the system beyond remedy. *“They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks the truth. Therefore, because you trample upon the poor and take from him exactions of wheat, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins -- you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate. Therefore, he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time”* (Amos 5, 10-13). City gate was a synonym for law court, because it was at the city gates the elders of the community gathered every day, heard the complains and pronounced judgments (see Ru 4,1-12).

Right after Amos came Prophet Hosea who again called attention to the injustice and pronounced his judgment. *“Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds and murder follows murder”* (Hos 4,1-2).

Isaiah and Micah who preached in Judah were contemporaries of Hosea. Isaiah was known as the greatest of all

prophets. He started his work listing out first the transgressions against justice. *“How the faithful city has become a harlot, she that was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow’s cause does not come to them”* (Is 1, 21-23).

A strong warning was issued to the rich through the prophet. Isaiah denounced the economic system which favored the wealthy and the powerful but discriminated against the poor. Many of the poor found themselves thrown into the streets and they lived in utter poverty. There was no one to care for them. *“He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry! Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing: “Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant”* (Is 5, 7-9).

The economic system came under a scathing attack from all the three prophets, Amos, Hosea and Isaiah. But Prophet Micah was the most brutal. The name Micah was a shortened version of Micaiah which means “Who is equal to the Lord”. The severity of his rebukes and the examples he cites, make one think that he must have been a farmer and a victim of grave injustice at the hands of the authorities of his time. Whatever his occupation, he had himself been through the bitter experiences of the poor.

Prophet Micah has spoken very strongly against the injustice in the society. *“Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil upon their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in the power of their hand. They covet fields, and seize them; and houses, and*

take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance. Therefore, thus says the LORD: Behold, against this family I am devising evil, from which you cannot remove your necks; and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be an evil time” (Micah 2, 1-3).

The poor were driven out of their land and the rich constructed huge mansions. The edifices might have been resorts to attract tourists or industrial estates to provide jobs to the affluent. Or, they might have been multi-lane highways, or cities. Whatever they be, the issue was that morality and justice had been trampled under foot

Money has come to be viewed as the most important thing in life. Prophet Micah speaks about this, *“Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong. Its heads give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for hire, its prophets divine for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, “Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No evil shall come upon us”* (Mi 3, 9-11). People regard money as God and they install wealth in God’s place on the altar. It was to this idol that they sacrificed the blood of the poor.

Micah castigates the rich and the powerful more severely than any other prophet. *“You who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin from off my people, and their flesh from off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron”* (Mi 3,2-3). This is not to say that they ate the human flesh. It is a depiction of the extent of misery the poor were subjected to on account of the extreme cruelty, exploitation and oppression unleashed by the wealthy and the ruling class.

The warnings and reprimands of prophets Amos and

Hosea did not have much impact. Israel was conquered and captured by Assyria in 721 B.C. The ten tribes of Israel disappeared from the face of the earth. After these events, prophets Jeremiah, Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah also spoke about Social Justice like the earlier prophets. They catalogued a list of the cruel deeds done to the poor. People were warned that if they did not repent and change their ways, the remaining two tribes of Israel (Judah and Benjamin) would also meet with the same fate as the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Here are the most important warnings of the prophets.

Prophet Jeremiah called them to conversion. He said in anguish, *“You defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination”* (Jer 2, 7); and *“On your skirts is found the lifeblood of guiltless poor; you did not find them breaking in”* (Jer 2, 34). The prophet lamented seeing of the plight of the poor. *“For wicked men are found among my people; they lurk like fowlers lying in wait. They set a trap; they catch men. Like a basket full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore, they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of wickedness; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy”* (Jer 5, 26-28).

At the beginning of the Babylonian captivity, Prophet Ezekiel too deplored the injustice in the society and urged the people to conversion: *“Behold, the princes of Israel in you, every one according to his power, have been bent on shedding blood. Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the sojourner suffers extortion in your midst; the fatherless and the widow are wronged in you... In you men take bribes to shed blood; you take interest and increase and make gain of your neighbors by extortion; and you have forgotten me, says the Lord GOD.... so I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you*

in and melt you... Her princes in the midst of her are like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in the midst of her... Her princes in the midst of her are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain” (Ez 22, 6-27).

The laments of Habakkuk contain the same theme. *“The law is slacked and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted” (Hb 1,4) “Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you, for the blood of men and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell therein. Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm! You have devised shame to your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the wood-work respond. Woe to him who builds a town with blood, and founds a city on iniquity!” (Hb 2, 8-12).*

Prophet Malachi, the last of the canonical prophets, did not have anything different to say either. After narrating various acts of injustice, he ended his discourse with the warning that the Lord would come soon to execute the punishment. *“Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts” (Mal 3, 5).*

The denunciations of the Prophets from Nathan to Malachi, over a period of 600 years, were centered on the subject of injustice in the society. When Amos measured the atrocities against the poor on the basis of the precepts

of the Covenant, he felt that the crimes of Israel were too serious to escape God's punishment. However, the prophets who came after Amos assured that all was not lost yet and that avoiding the punishment was still a possibility provided the rich mended their ways and delivered justice to the poor. The injustice heaped on the poor was so grave that the prophet called the rich "**cannibals**".

The reproach as cannibals unveils the extent of cruelty the poor had suffered. The condemnation has not lost its relevance today. Various happenings around the world bear ample evidence of the steady increase in the incidents of injustice against the poor. What a lot of food is wasted in parties, hotels and aircrafts, when millions of people go hungry every day! What a sad sight it is to see human beings fighting with dogs for the leftover food in the refuse after wedding meals and banquets!

Bodies of millions of unborn babies are used for manufacturing beauty products. What can we say about doctors who fry and eat the body of the aborted babies? It is heard that there are hotels that serve human fetus as a delicacy. Thus, there are several different ways the flesh of the poor and the innocent is being eaten.

One thing is certain. Injustice persists to this day in society. Terrible punishments await those who are found guilty. The signs of destruction are already evident in nature and in society. Several Popes, from Leo XIII to Pope Francis, have taken up the cry of mother earth forced to drink the blood of her own children and made it resound in the horizons in various ways. Does anyone pay heed to his call for help?

What is the source of injustice? Who is responsible for its continuance? This question will be discussed next, in a kind of a pilgrimage through the teachings of the prophets.

19

Empty Rituals

“Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood” (Is 1, 14-15).

When we study the Prophetic books, looking for the root cause of injustice, we end up with the rituals of worship. The Prophets focus their attention mainly on the people behind the spread of false notions. The blame comes to rest squarely on priests, prophets and kings. They were primarily responsible for distancing the people from God. The shepherds appointed to guide the people along the right path themselves have misled them by their selfish acts. They have paved the way for the rapid spread of injustice in the society. Curiously, alongside, they tried their best to make the people believe that they were holy and very close to God.

God liberated the People of Israel from slavery in Egypt so that they would offer worship to Him. *“Thus says the LORD, Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son” (Ex 4, 22-23).* True worship would ensure freedom. *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; and I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect” (Lev 26,13).*

God asked Israel to celebrate certain festivals such as Passover, Pentecost, Feast of the Tabernacle and events such as the year of Sabbath and the year of Jubilee. All these would help recall to mind the great things God had done in their lives and educate the future generations about the blessings God had showered on them. Celebrating the festivals would also be a sign of their resolve to live according to the Commandments of God. Sadly, the rituals failed to achieve the intended purposes. The festivals did not succeed in creating a community of people grounded in faith and justice, but turned out to be mere celebrations. The Commandments of God were neglected. The poor were denied justice. Divine worship was replaced with idol worship.

The Bible insinuates that Aaron, the very first High Priest, misguided the people in the matter of worship. The people had set up their tents at the foot of Mount Sinai. They grew restless when Moses, who went up the mountain, had not returned even after weeks. This is what happened thereafter. *“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, “Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (Ex 32, 1).*

Aaron the High Priest, who was to guide the people on the right path, not only submitted to their unholy request but pushed them into idol worship. He asked them for their ornaments, out of which a calf was made and then they proclaimed, *“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt! When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD”. And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings*

and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play” (Ex 32, 4-6). “Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to their shame among their enemies)” (Ex 32, 25). When Moses questioned Aaron, he did not have any valid explanation for what he had done. All he could say was, “Let any who have gold take it off”; so, they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and there came out this calf” (Ex 32, 24).

Aaron got away with it easily, so it seems, though the offence was serious and reprehensible. Worshipping the calf at Mount Sinai was the first sin of Israel. Aaron was the chief culprit. Shockingly, the successors of Aaron kept up the practice. The priests, tasked with teaching the ways of God, themselves led the people astray. Offering sacrifice and seeking God’s blessings on the people were their primary responsibilities. They were to serve as a bridge between God and people. But they lost sight of their duties. The sacrifices and celebrations did not fulfill the intended purposes. This was the essence of the admonitions by the Prophets. Isaiah was not alone in his reproach of the priests. Almost all the Prophets deplored the aberrations in worship and they placed the blame at the doorsteps of the priests.

Offering sacrifice without observance of the Commandments is not acceptable to God. The tradition of this teaching began with Prophet Samuel who rebuked Saul for disobeying the word of God. *“Samuel said, ‘Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams”* (1 Sam 15, 22). The priests as well as the people preferred sacrifices and celebrations to leading a life in accordance with the Commandments of God. The term ‘people’ refer to the wealthy and those in authority.

Solomon built the Temple and consecrated it to the Lord, with a great celebration. *“Solomon offered as peace offerings to the LORD twenty-two thousand oxen and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep... So Solomon held the feast at that time, and all Israel with him, a great assembly, from the entrance of Hamath to the Brook of Egypt, before the LORD our God, seven days”* (1 Kgs 8, 63-65).

Solomon started the tradition of celebrations. God’s response to the long prayer of Solomon deserves special mention. *“The LORD said to him, ‘I have heard your prayer and your supplication, which you have made before me; ..., if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father, saying, ... ‘There shall not fail you a man upon the throne of Israel.’ But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them; ... Because they forsook the LORD their God who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and laid hold on other gods, and worshiped them and served them; therefore, the LORD has brought all this evil upon them”* (1 Kgs 9, 3-9).

This was written after analyzing the events that led to the Babylonian captivity. The Deuteronomistic Historian wrote it after a careful study of the situation. Its echoes can be heard in the rebukes by the Prophets.

Prophet Amos categorically declared that because of the rampant injustice God rejected all the rituals connected with the worship by the people of Israel. *“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps, I will not listen” (Am 5, 21-23). The only reason for this rejection was the prevailing injustice in the land. Sacrifice and celebrations by those committing injustice would not be acceptable to God. Hence the Prophet commanded, *“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Am 5, 24).*

Prophet Hosea who came after Amos used even stronger language. After exposing the injustice existing in the society, the prophet made it clear who was responsible for such atrocities against the poor. *“Let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest.... My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children” (Hos 4, 4-6).* The “lack of knowledge” pointed to the ignorance of the people about the will of God revealed through the Commandments. People did not know the plan God had for them; that is why they went astray. The priests who should know these things were themselves ignorant and so he had no right to continue as the priests of God.

This was not an accusation against any particular priest in Israel but a general complaint applicable for all times. The priests of today are no exception to this wrongdoing. Those responsible for imparting knowledge of God to the people, use their time and talent to build schools and super specialty hospitals where only the rich are served. The poor are neglected totally. It is time that we listen to the voice of the prophets, who are lamenting that the people do not know God because they have not been taught by the priests.

Faulty teachings and erroneous ideas are the basic causes of injustice in the society. The prophet says that three groups of leaders were responsible for it. *“Hear this, O priests! Give heed, O house of Israel! Hearken, O house of the king! For the judgment pertains to you; for you have been a snare at Mizpah, and a net spread upon Tabor”* (Hos 5, 1). In the list, the priests are mentioned first and only then the kings and the rich. Again, the responsibility of the priests was emphasized, *“It shall be like people, like priest; I will punish them for their ways, and requite them for their deeds”* (Hos 4, 9).

Prophet Hosea spoke with the ardent enthusiasm of Samuel to those who found satisfaction in sacrifices and celebration of feasts. *“I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings”* (Hos 6, 6). Here, the word “love” refers to the fidelity to the Covenant. The original Hebrew word for love is ‘hezéd’. No one can know God without acting with justice. This was the view of the Prophets as a whole. Prophet Jeremiah clarified it further while talking about King Josiah. *“He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the LORD”* (Jer 22, 16).

Worship and all the accompanying ritual should be supported by a life based on justice. If this is not the case, the very worship priests offer may become a source of injustice, especially if it results in self-righteous attitudes and the illusion that they are close to God. Prophet Jeremiah has warned them against such deceptions and the pride they give rise to.

King Josiah was killed in 609 B.C. in a battle at Megiddo. With his death, the religious renewal came to a halt. The old rituals and the false notions were revived again. Seeing the people moving on the wrong path, Jeremiah entreated them to put their trust in the Lord and to

live by God's Commandments. But his words fell on deaf ears. They were very certain that as long as the Temple of Jerusalem existed, the Lord would be with them and would protect them. In fact, they made the celebrations more grandiose. Jeremiah found himself waging a lone battle against the priests and the false prophets who enjoyed the patronage of the King and the officials. He carried on with his call to conversion, warning them about God's wrath. The end result, everyone turned against him and there was even an attempt on his life.

Jeremiah tried hard to eradicate the wrong notions the people had about rituals. His focus was to instill in them a new attitude centered on justice. *"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant"* (Jer 1, 9-10). Jeremiah was a prophet specially called by God. He knew full well that even though people were conducting sacrifices and celebrating festivals with great enthusiasm and pomp, they were actually straying away from the source of the living water, God, and were digging empty cisterns: *"my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water"* (Jer 2.13). As could be expected, people were not too happy with such accusations and they rejected Jeremiah and his teachings altogether.

The way Jeremiah spoke in the Temple, all their illusions would have crumbled into dust. *"Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'* *"For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this*

place, ... Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!' -- only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, says the LORD" (Jer 7, 4-11). Without a life of justice, going to the Temple and participating in the worship will not secure anyone God's protection.

But people refused to give heed to Jeremiah's plea mainly because they had totally been misguided by the priests and the false prophets. While they, the official leaders of the people, stood on one side, Jeremiah, the prophet, stood all alone on the opposite side. Whom should the people follow? How would they know who the true prophet is and who the false prophet? Where can they find the Word of God without any distortion?

Jeremiah upheld one thing clearly. The true prophet was one who remained faithful to the age-old faith of Israel and called the people to conversion, openly warning them about the impending disaster. The false prophets, on the other hand, gave people false hopes that God would protect them at all costs and therefore there was nothing to fear. Having allowed themselves to be misguided, people continued in their old ways of injustice (Jer 28, 1-9). They blindly put their faith in the false prophets until it was too late. *"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). *"But, behold, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie...."* (Jer 8, 8-11).

Prophet Ezekiel compared the people of Israel to a for-

treasuries under a siege. The walls are broken by the constant attacks of the enemy. The army could enter the city any time through the broken walls. At this juncture, the priests and the false prophets, instead of standing guard with weapons at the sites of the broken walls, were busy white washing the cracks. *“Its prophets have smeared whitewash on their behalf, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, “Thus says the Lord GOD,” when the LORD has not spoken. The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress. And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one”* (Ez 22, 28-30; 13, 10). In short, Ezekiel accused the false prophets and priests of covering up the wrongdoings of the people with false promises and held them responsible for the disaster that would soon fall on the people.

The fortress of Jerusalem was destroyed. The Temple became a heap of ashes. Jerusalem was depicted as a mother lamenting, sitting amidst the ashes. The prophet explained the cause of her sorrow. *“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.... Is this the city which was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?”* (Lam 2, 14-15).

God desired that people should live according to the Commandments of the Covenant and that the priests and the prophets should teach them to adhere to the precepts of the Covenant. Since this did not happen, God, through the true prophets, spoke of the severe punishment in store for them. Through Prophet Amos, God pronounced judgment on the priest Amaziah who forbade him to speak the Word of God. *“Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You*

say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.' Therefore, thus says the LORD: 'Your wife shall be a harlot in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land' (Am 7, 16-17).

The Temple that provided a false sense of security will be destroyed by God. "I saw the LORD standing beside the altar, and he said: "Smite the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people; and what are left of them I will slay with the sword; not one of them shall flee away, not one of them shall escape. "Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down" (Am 9, 1-2). The impression gained is that even going to the Temple was a sin, deserving of capital punishment.

All the true Prophets spoke against the priests and false prophets who encouraged the people to offer sacrifices and prayers rather than lead a life based on justice. Prophet Micah warned about the destruction of Jerusalem, "Because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height" (Mi 3, 12). Prophet Jeremiah repeated the warning about the destruction of the Temple, "I will do to the house which is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh" (Jer 7, 14; 26, 4-6). These are just a few examples.

The last of the Canonical Prophets, Malachi shouted to close the doors of the Temple in order to prevent the people, who did not discharge justice to the poor, from entering to offer sacrifices. "Oh, that there were one among

you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire upon my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand” (Mal 1, 10).

The priests are called to learn the laws of God and teach them to the people. *“O priests, this command is for you. If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings; indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung upon your faces, the dung of your offerings, and I will put you out of my presence” (Mal 2, 1-3).*

“The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction” (Mal 2, 7-9).

Priests, prophets and leaders are called to lead people in the ways of the Lord. They are appointed as guides and so their task is to teach people and show them the right way. Isaiah’s berating was about the source of injustice, *“His watchmen are blind, they are all without knowledge; they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. The shepherds also have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain, one and all” (Is 56, 10-11).* The term ‘priest’ refers not only to those designated to offer sacrifice but also to all those who shoulder the responsibility to lead the people to God.

Sacrifices and festivals, meant to lead people to holiness and to inspire them to live in accordance with the Commandments of God, paved the way to injustice creating illusions of security. Worship of God turned into a travesty. Rituals lacked in reverence to God. In fact, worship did not at all reflect the spirit of true worship. Inexplicably, worships gave rise to several forms of injustice. The blame would fall on the leaders of the people. They could in no way evade the critical gaze of the Prophets.

What did the prophets expect from the people? To this question now turn our attention next.

20

Prophetic challenge

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Am 5, 24).

The People of Israel were called to become witnesses to God in the midst of other peoples. However, the verdict the prophets passed on the people was just the contrary. They declared that people of Israel utterly failed to carry out their mission. Their failures were listed out, the causes were identified and they were warned of the terrible punishment awaiting them. Everyone was shocked. What did the Prophets ask? What did God demand from them?

“Return to the Lord!” This was the constant call of the Prophets to the people. The original Hebrew word is “Shub” which literally means to ‘return to the origin’. People were reminded of their original state of living and were asked to reflect how they ended up into the present state. They had failed on all fronts; most of all they had failed to observe the Commandments of God. The prophets, from Isaiah to Malachi, all 16 of them, who have a book in their name, are unanimous in their critic of the wayward life of the people.

Two things were required to make the ‘Return to the Lord’ possible: 1. A realization that they had strayed into the wrong path and 2. The knowledge of where they were supposed to return to. The Prophets were highly critical of their conduct in the social, the economic and the religious spheres. The Lord God said, *“How can you say, ‘I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baals’? Look at your way in the valley; know what you have done ... How well you*

direct your course to seek lovers! So that even to wicked women you have taught your ways. Also, on your skirts is found the lifeblood of guiltless poor; you did not find them breaking in” (Jer 2, 23-34).

There is only one thing from to do: *“Return, faithless Israel, says the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the LORD; I will not be angry forever” (Jer 3, 12.14. 22).* The Prophet made it clear where they were to return to, *“If you return, O Israel, says the LORD, to me you should return. If you remove your abominations from my presence, and do not waver” (Jer 4, 1).*

How should they come back to the Lord? What is it that the Lord wants from them? The answer is simple: Act justly. Amos, the prophet of Social Justice, put it succinctly: *“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Am 5, 24).* Two Hebrew words, ‘mishpath’, ‘sedaqa’, which mean ‘justice’ and ‘truth’, carry special significance in the study of ‘Social Justice’.

Mishpath:

The origin of this word is the verb ‘Shaphath’, which is translated as ‘judge’. The word appears 422 times in the Old Testament and refers to the mechanism for maintaining justice and peace in the society. Everyone must get what he deserves. This has to be guaranteed to all by the law of the Land. The rulers have to ensure impartial exercise of justice in the society. If anyone suffers any injustice, the rulers should investigate the case and propose a remedy. Instituting just laws is the first step in this process. With the Ten Commandments of the Covenant serving as the basis, justice can be made available to all. The law, though, might have to be revised from time to time to ensure that it stays relevant and meaningful.

Laws, once enacted, should be enforced strictly. Main-

taining a Judiciary is the responsibility of the ruling party. If someone has suffered injustice, everything should be put to work swiftly – the law, the judges and the court – to restore justice to the aggrieved party. Thus, together with just laws, impartial judges, immune to bribe and corruption are essential for safeguarding justice in the society. A just ruler would ensure that the laws are enforced throughout the nation. The three elements – the laws, the judges and the executive authority- are the critical elements of the system, implied in the word, ‘mishpath’.

The translated version ‘role down like waters’ does not fully convey the force of the original Hebrew word. The vision of the Prophet was that justice should flow like the raging waters overpowering all the obstacles on the way. Nothing should be allowed to stand in its path. What Amos had envisaged was a strong and swift flow of justice like flood waters, triumphing over all the barriers. Injustice would be no more and the position of the kings might see a reversal. This must not be a one-time occurrence, but an enduring phenomenon. The flow would never cease. Truth and Justice are like the ever-flowing streams.

Sedaqa

The Hebrew word ‘Sedaqa’ is rendered in English as ‘Truth’. The word has actually many more meanings. The literal meaning is ‘A state or life that is pleasing to God’. Justice is synonymous with righteousness in English. Sidiq is the adjective of the word Sedaqa. The reasoning is simple. The person who is acceptable to God is just. A person becomes just when he lives in accordance with the Commandments of God. When all the people in a society conform to the precepts of the Covenant, justice will reign in the society.

In this sense, the term righteousness might be closer

in meaning to the original Hebrew word. God has a specific plan for every individual, for every society and for the universe as a whole. 'fate' is the word generally used, in a broad way, to refer to the plan of God. This is also said to be a person's mission, entrusted by God. Only if a person is faithful to his mission, to the plan of God, he will find peace and joy in life. The plan of God is to remove injustice and to establish justice in the world. Practice of righteousness and justice is what enables us to participate in the plan of God. Everyone is called to live in accordance with the plan of God.

The word Sedaqa can also mean 'Truth'. The plan of God is nothing but truth for every person and society. When a person lives by the truth, he leads a just life and therefore, he will be acceptable and pleasing to God.

The phrase 'Ever flowing stream' sounds more forceful in the original version in Hebrew. The stream is portrayed as caused by a cloud burst. It is so powerful that it would uproot and carry with it whatever it finds on its way. God desires that this flow should go on forever. Without it, Israel cannot stay as the people of God. No one can become acceptable to God without doing His will. Prophet Amos has spoken about it time and again in various ways. *"Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to naught. Seek the LORD and live, lest he breaks out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel, you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth!"* (Am 5, 4-7).

Amos makes it clear that 'Seek the Lord' means to seek justice, to act justly and to establish justice. *"Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and*

love good, and establish justice in the gate” (Am 5, 14-15). ‘City gate’ stands for the court system that ensures justice for all. During the time of the tribal rule, the elders of the tribe would come to the gate to listen to the complaints of the people and after hearing both sides, they would pass the judgment. When the rule of the kings began, the system changed but the usage of ‘city gate’ remained. The prophet viewed administering justice as the foundation of religiosity and spirituality.

Right after Prophet Amos, Prophet Hosea arrived on the scene in the Northern Kingdom, Israel. He is known as the ‘prophet of love’. However, he made it a point to expose the prevailing injustice in the society and invited the people to act justly. *“I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings”* (Hos 6, 6). By so saying, Hosea was calling attention to the basic attitude required in God-man relationship. The Hebrew word ‘hezod’ is translated as love. Unchanging love, which was part of the Covenant, was expressed by the word ‘hezod’. Prophet Hosea exhorted everyone to develop such a love towards others. Justice is an essential ingredient of this love, without which no one can come to know or love God.

Prophet Hosea urged the people to act justly. *“Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of steadfast love”* (Hos 10, 12). The Hebrew word he used was ‘Sedaqa’, which was translated as justice. On the other hand, the word ‘Hezod’ can also mean mercy. This is the steadfast love spoken of in Hos 6, 6. To have love and mercy, one has to act justly. *“So, you, by the help of your God, return, (Shub) hold fast to love (Hezod) and justice (Mishpat), and wait continually for your God”* (Hos 12, 6). Returning to the Lord would mean practicing justice and steadfast love in life. Since people do not have the power to do this, God will grant it to them as a gift (Hos 2, 19).

While Hosea was proclaiming the Word of God in Israel, the Northern Kingdom, during the second half of 8th century B.C., two other Prophets, Isaiah and Micah, were busy preaching in Judea, the Southern Kingdom. Isaiah is known as the prophet of holiness, but he made it clear that the basis for holiness was justice. Isaiah who, in a vision, entered into the presence of God, the most holy, grew conscious of the sinfulness of the society. In utter fear and shock, he cried out, *“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”* (Is 6, 5).

It is an unclean heart that makes the lips unclean. Isaiah’s cry was a sincere expression of his sinfulness. Already in the first chapter he had spoken about the sinfulness of the people, *“Sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged”* (Is 1, 4). The prophet made it clear that God would not accept their sacrifices and celebrations of festivals. He proceeded to tell them what God desired from them and how they could return to the Lord, *“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil”* (Is 1, 16).

He continues to explain how they are to seek justice in the light of contemporary realities and the needs of the day. *“Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow”* (Is 1, 17). Orphans and widows represent the people who are at the bottom of the social pyramid who have no one to assist them. Justice done to them is the foundation of social justice. God will not accept the prayers and sacrifices of people or forgive their sins if they have not rendered justice to the poorest in the society.

Isaiah presents a picture of injustice in the society. *“How the faithful city has become a harlot, she that was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow’s cause does not come to them”* (Is 1, 21-23). Towards the close of this discourse, he speaks of the plight of the widows and the orphans, and draws attention to the gross violations of justice in the society. Then as if in a trance, he says, *“Zion shall be redeemed by justice (Mishpath), and those in her who repent, by righteousness (Sedaqa)”* (Is 1, 27). Justice and righteousness are two essential virtues that should characterize a society, without which God is unlikely to be pleased with the people.

Everyone in the world, and not only Israel, desires peace. Generally, peace is established by force. Many strive to attain peace through questionable means. We all may know the famous Roman saying, ‘If you desire peace, be prepared for war’ – ‘*Si vis pacem, prepara bellum*’. Pope Paul VI created a motto which was quite the opposite of the Roman axiom. ‘If you desire peace, be prepared to make peace’ – ‘*Si vis pacem, perpara pacem*’. How does one prepare for peace? How could we have lasting peace on earth? The answer was provided already twenty-eight centuries ago through Prophet Isaiah.

“The effect of righteousness will be peace and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever” (Is 32, 17). The word ‘sedaqa’ is translated as righteousness or justice. The law of God stipulates that man should live in harmony with God, with fellow human beings and with the universe. Righteousness, or justice, requires that a person fulfills his responsibilities towards oneself and towards

others. Without adherence to justice, there cannot be peace in an individual, or in a society or in a nation. Today the Islamic terrorism has the whole world feeling bewildered. Behind this evil movement, we can see extreme cruelty and denial of justice. How many more Isaiah's have to come to teach us that peace on earth is not possible without practice of justice?

The people of Israel suffered all the punishment foretold by the Prophets and only then could they return from the Babylonian captivity. They had the experience of God's anger on the one side and the warmth of His love on the other. In the process, the past events were slowly forgotten. Isaiah III was sent to remind the people to act justly in accordance with the Commandments of God. His teaching is contained in Is 56-66.

The Prophet started his preaching by inviting the people to practice social justice. *"Thus says the LORD: 'Keep justice (sedaqa) and do righteousness (mishpath), for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed'"* (Is 56, 1). Though time and situation had changed, there was no change in the catalogue of challenges about which the prophets had warned the people. After all, the Word of God the prophet spoke of transcends time and place. A just life was what was required to experience the salvation that God makes available to the people.

After hurling stern warnings on those who observe religious rituals and celebrations as a cover to hide their misdeeds, the Prophet announced what God expects of them. *"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? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"* (Is 58, 6-7). Here is

a comprehensive answer to the question, ‘What is social justice in the prophetic view?’ Jesus upheld these things as the basis for the Last Judgment (Mt 25, 31-46).

A contemporary of Isaiah, Prophet Micah, squeezed into a sentence the teachings of Prophets Amos, Hosea and Isaiah. A devotee had asked him what he should do to please God. He said that he was willing to do anything. *“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”* (Mi 6, 6-7). These were the things the people usually considered as their religious duty and what God expected from them. But Micah had something else to tell them.

The Prophet responded briefly, *“He has showed you, oh man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice (mishpath), and to love kindness (hezeh), and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Mi 6, 8). What is the Prophet’s message? ‘Give up your ego, and accept the reality of your life before God and people, and be humble. Deepen your awareness that all that you have is the gratuitous gift of God and there is nothing one could boast of as his own. In fact, wear the attitude that communicates that all that we have and all that we are belong to God’.

The proof of this awareness will be acts of kindness wrapped, as it were, with justice. This is the only demand God makes of man. One cannot please God by making some offering. Anyway, what great offering can man make to God who is the Creator and the Owner of whatever exists in the universe? God does not eat meat or drink blood (Is 1, 11-13). In fact, it is a folly to think that one can please God by making an offering. The thing that God de-

sires is the happiness of all the people. For this to happen, people have to practice justice. Justice should be inspired by the unchanging love of God which was offered through the Covenant.

Prophet Jeremiah, on seeing that the people had gone astray and were heading toward a major disaster, was heart-broken. Amidst his cries of anguish, he urged them to return to the Lord, and ‘to act justly’. *“If you return, O Israel, says the LORD, to me you should return. If you remove your abominations from my presence, and do not waver, and if you swear, ‘As the LORD lives,’ in truth, in justice (mishpath), and in uprightness (sedaqa), then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory”* (Jer 4, 1-2). This was the only way to prevent the total destruction that was about to befall Jerusalem. He repeated his exhortation time and again but his warnings fell on deaf ears. *“Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice (mishpath) and seeks truth (emunah) that I may pardon her”* (Jer 5, 1).

They could find no one acting justly and truthfully in the entire city. All that the Prophet could do was to lament over the Truth (Jer 4, 19-31; 8, 18 – 9, 2; 10, 17-24; 15, 10-21). However, beyond the destruction, the Prophet could see a bright future, the rise of a society not built by human hands but as a gift from God, the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God will unfold through the Messiah, the Savior God would send to make salvation available for all humanity.

The subject of our discussion next will be the just society envisaged by the prophets.

21

A Day Will Come

“I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD” (Hosea 2, 19-20).

Neither teaching, nor criticism, nor appeal, nor threats could influence the people to stop their actions against righteousness. Left to himself, man seems incapable of reforming himself. Even in the face of obvious misdeeds and vehement critics, little or no change is seen in individuals or in the society. God had to directly involve with the sinful humanity to effect a change. Accordingly, the Prophets changed their discourse from teaching, advising and criticizing to envisioning a bright future. Prophetic pronouncements gave way to apocalyptic visions.

“A day will come”, so goes a prophetic dream. God will drive away all the injustice and put an end to the evil ways. He will establish Justice and will exclaim again that *“everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good”* (Gen 1, 31). The world will go back to that original state. This will not be the result of human action but the work of God. God will send a Savior to the world as foretold by the prophets. This vision is based on the promises of God about a future, free of injustice and violence. All the cruelties will end and people will live in freedom as the children of God. Peace and joy will reign in the hearts of people. This was the vision about justice, shared by Prophets from Hosea to Malachi. Among them Hosea deserves a special mention.

Hosea is known as the prophet of the love of God. His vision expounds the characteristics of a just society and the ways of forming one. He had had an intimate experience of marital relationship, and of the terrible hurt one feels when cheated by the spouse. Hosea loved Gomer deeply but she left him and went after other men. Hosea searched her out with deep love and anxiety, and found that she had become a prostitute and a slave. Settling the ransom money, he redeemed her and accepted her as his wife again (Hosea 1, 1-3, 5). Amidst these events, the picture of the unending love of God to the people was etched clearly on his prophetic mind. He had the vision of the blessed future God was going to grant to His people. It is prophet Hosea who used the image of marital love to express Yahweh's love and care for the people of Israel, depicting God as husband and the people as the wife.

God extended His powerful hands to liberate the people of Israel from the slavery in Egypt and then guided them through the wilderness. In the prophetic view, those were the golden years of Israel. Then God took care of them like the apple of His eyes; protected them like a father protects his children; and the people followed God like an obedient wife follows her husband. Hosea concluded his vision with the promise that God would again guide the people to that state.

“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt” (Hos 2, 14-15). Just as it happens in the early days of a marriage, God will guide the people to a second honeymoon. God, out of his unending love, would redeem the people who had gone astray and descended to a state of slavery worse than what they had experienced in Egypt,

and restore their status as the children of God. It will be like the price a bridegroom pays for the bride and through it a just society would emerge – this was the vision that unfolded in the eyes of Hosea.

The prophet listed five things as dowry: Justice, Truth, Love, Mercy and Fidelity. A marriage, resting on these virtues, is certain to last until death and its real fruit will be the wisdom given by God. *“I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD” (Hos 2, 19-20).*

The real cause of the misery of Israel was that they had gone away from the Lord. The distance was created by the breaking of the precepts of the Covenant. They broke the Commandments as they did not know the Lord. Subsequently, they had also installed other things in the Lord’s place. In the eyes of God, idol worship is the same as unfaithfulness to God. The prophet portrayed it as prostitution. Now she must come back. God would take back the one He had rejected. For this to happen, one must observe the five virtues which had been promised as the dowry.

1. Justice

Sedaqa is the Hebrew word, meaning justice. The word is also translated as integrity, righteousness, devotion, piety. Justice is the first gift God gives to the people whom He accepts as the bride. Righteousness is the capacity to carry out one’s responsibility according to the precepts of the Covenant and to lead a life pleasing to God. The people had abandoned the true God and had become the slaves of Baal worship. But God would redeem them by paying the required ransom and free them from slavery. The first ‘installment’ of the payment is the capacity to act justly

and it would make a big difference in their conduct and attitudes.

2. Truth

Mishpath is the Hebrew word used for Truth. The word is translated as ‘Justice’, which should be safeguarded through the enactment of appropriate laws, a just court system and judgments which are truthful and fair. ‘Justice’, the second gift, should be made available to all. Amos compared it to a cloud burst with its torrential waters flowing down removing all the obstacles on its way. An action of this nature, since it is not possible for man to do, will be executed by God. This is the second of the dowry gifts God gives.

3. Love

Hezed is the Hebrew word used for love. The word is translated as love that never changes or diminishes or ends. God gave us this love as a gift while making the Covenant. This love comprises of the love God gives to His people and of the response of the people to God’s love. The capacity to share such a love is also donated by God. All of people’s activities will be motivated by this love. People obey the precepts of the Covenant, not because they are scared of any punishment or they hope to obtain some rewards, but out of their deep love for God. St. Theresa of Lisieux has given a childlike definition of this love. “I will not sin even if there is no hell; even if there is no heaven, I will love God because God is my Father”.

4. Kindness (Mercy)

Rahamim is the Hebrew word for kindness. This is derived from the word ‘rehem’ which means the womb. In other words, the word conveys a mother’s attitude towards

the baby in her womb. The fetus depends totally on its mother for its life, because it is part of her body. Located as it is right below the heart of the mother, its heart beats are synchronized and the mother would have natural love for the life growing within her. This feeling can be described as kindness, compassion, tenderness, affection. This is the very same attitude that God has for His people. People should also develop similar sentiments towards each other. This is part of the marriage contract and the fourth gift of God.

5. Fidelity

Emunah is a Hebrew word meaning faithfulness. The word is also translated as ‘make it firm’, and is derived from the word ‘aman’ which means confirm. This has given rise to the word ‘Amen’ which means ‘surely’, ‘certainly’. Once ‘Amen’ is said at the end of a statement, there cannot be any change in it. Faithfulness or fidelity is somewhat like a full stop at the end of a sentence. God would follow through the promises He made through the Covenant. There will be no change in them. In a similar fashion, people should express their love towards God and towards each other. God will provide them the capacity to remain faithful. This is the fifth gift of God. Infidelity was their main transgression, which haunted them all through the ages.

Through these five gifts, Israel would become the People of God again. The model for their love is the love that exists between a husband and a wife. This relationship will last forever. “I will betroth you to me forever”. This assurance, repeated later through Prophets Jeremiah (31, 23-40) and Ezekiel (36, 22-28), could be seen as a detailed description of this dowry.

As if to top these five gifts, God grants His people yet

another gift, the gift of the knowledge of God. “*You shall know the LORD*” (Hos 2, 20). Lack of knowledge of God is the root cause of much of the evil in the world. However, the knowledge the prophet speaks of is not the intellectual type. He refers to the knowledge of the heart which is essential for any intimate relationship, whether it be with God or with fellow human beings.

All relationship is nurtured by the acts of giving and accepting. Love is expressed through justice and integrity and is guided by kindness and concern for the needy. When such knowledge is attained, man would recover the holiness he lost in the Paradise by the sin of Adam and Eve. This would bring back the paradise to the earth, the New Heaven and the New Earth that are spoken of in the Bible. All this will, of course, be a gratuitous gift of God. Prophet Hosea shared this vision with the people who were about to be defeated and deported by Assyria. The prophets, who followed Hosea, picked up the theme and spoke about it with greater clarity.

Prophet Micah, a contemporary of Hosea, had a dream as well. He denounced the people who act without justice as cannibals. Prophet Micah made it clear that what God wants is neither sacrifice nor offering but acts of justice, imbued with mercy and humility. He could, however, see deep into the future. He shares his dream of a just society which would emerge in the last days. “*They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken*” (Mi 4, 3-4). There will be lasting peace. Everyone will have his own place to stay, fertile soil for agriculture and a prosperous life, a life of peace and security. But, when and how would it become a reality?

In the very beginning of the oracle (Mi 4,1) the prophet had said that ‘The last day’ refers to the day God would come to execute justice on earth. He firmly believed that such a day would come soon and he proclaimed it loudly. How would justice be executed? How would peace be established? That is the path to heaven, to God Himself. Jerusalem was the highest mountain where the Temple of the Lord stood. It was a symbol of heaven. From all over the world people will flock there as pilgrims, seeking neither miracles nor prosperity but only to learn about the Commandments of the Lord. *“Many nations shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths”. For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Mi 4, 2).*

This is the path of justice and it is in this manner that God will execute justice on earth. God will lead the people to the knowledge of God by creating an ardent desire in them to walk the path of the Lord. Out of their inner longings, people would search for the will of God. They would travel to Jerusalem because they regard the city as the dwelling place of God. Once they recognized the true God and realized that His will was unending love, they would live by their convictions. Lasting peace would follow automatically.

This is the dream God had planted in the heart of the Prophet. It is important to note that the only thing that Jerusalem has to give to the Pilgrims flocking to the city and searching for the will of God is the Commandment of the Lord and His Word. How great would it be if in all the pilgrim centers the authorities teach the Word of God without dressing it up with false promises and dubious claims! If the Word of God were preached without dilution, the dream of the Prophet would surely become a real-

ity quite soon. But alas, in many a pilgrim center, miracles are promised to attract more pilgrims and to augment the income from their offerings, rather than proclaiming the unadulterated Word of God that is sharper than any two edged sword (Heb 4,12).

Prophet Micah proclaimed that in order to establish lasting peace and justice on earth God would send a Savior who will be born in Bethlehem of Judea (Mi 5, 2). *“He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth”* (Mi 5, 4). The Prophet waited for this day, *“I will look to the LORD, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me”* (Mi 7, 7).

The Prophet knew that his waiting would not be in vain. He proclaimed that it is the sin of man that vanquishes justice. *“Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me. I will bear the indignation of the LORD because I have sinned against him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me. He will bring me forth to the light; I shall behold his deliverance”* (Mi 7, 8-9).

Sins repeated would drive the person to plunge deeper into the mire of sin. Increasing violence and injustice are the consequences of sins committed repeatedly. God will put an end to this situation too. *“Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea”* (Mi 7, 18-19). This was the dream held out by the Prophet and the entire world wait for its realization. The fulfillment of this dream has begun in Jesus who was born

in Bethlehem, died in Jerusalem and resurrected on the third day; yet we are still waiting for its final realization.

Prophet Isaiah was known as the Messianic prophet. He provided some clarifications about Micah's dream. In fact, all the dreams about the anointed King unfolded in the prophecies of Isaiah. He contended that a bright light shone on the people who lived in the darkness of injustice, violence, sorrow and despair. As he continues to explain his dream, we can recognize the formation of a society rooted in justice. *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace". Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this"* (Is 9, 6-7).

The Messiah, who would establish justice on earth, was the main theme of the talks of Isaiah. One such prophecy was that the King, who is filled with the Holy Spirit and the gifts of God, will administer justice to the poor. *"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots... He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness (mishpath) he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Righteousness (sedaqa) shall be the girdle of his waist, and faithfulness (emunah) the girdle of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them"* (Is 11, 1-6). There will be lasting peace on earth. No one will hurt another. The wicked wild

animals will become meek and friendly. This was the sign of peace and justice that reigned on earth.

For all these marvels the source will be the knowledge of God. *“The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea”* (Is 11, 8-9). ‘Knowledge of the Lord’ does not do full justice to the original Hebrew word. The knowledge could be acquired by listening to others or by reading and study. That is not what the Prophet had intended. The original word could be translated as ‘Know God’. It is an experiential knowledge personally gained that would bring about a radical change in life. It would lead to a change in values, preferences, desires and hopes, based on the Commandments of God. This is the knowledge God would bless us with and we shall be enabled to build a just society.

Ultimately, it will be God who will establish justice on earth. *“Thou hast been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat; for the blast of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall”* (Is 25,4). The Lord said, *“Behold, I am laying in Zion for a foundation a stone, ... And I will make justice (mishpath) the line, and righteousness (sedaqa) the plummet; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter”* (Is 28, 16-17). The measuring line and the plummet represent the laws God gave the people as the guiding tools.

The Lord will be the guide for every person. Guidance will not be something foisted from outside but based on the inspiration God has placed in everyone’s heart. *“Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it’, when you turn to the right or when you turn to*

the left” (Is 30,21). God will send a King to establish justice on earth and through Him, “Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness (mishpath) abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness (sedaqa) will be peace (shalom), and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever” (Is 32, 16-17). By the grace of God, where there is justice there will be peace. God will send His servant to execute this. “A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law” (Is 42, 3-4).

This is not the day-dream of a coward or the vain glory of a defeated individual. In the mind of God, a just society has already been formed. The Prophet could see it with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and has vouched for it. *“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.... I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress...They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.... The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the LORD” (Is 65, 17-25).*

The Prophet and the people were eagerly waiting for that beautiful day. *“Behold, I will extend prosperity to her like a river and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall suck, you shall be carried upon her hip, and dandled upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” (Is 66, 12-13).* The entire life of Israel seems filled with days of waiting. When their hopes started to weaken God sent prophets to re-kindle their spirits.

In the place of the broken Covenant of Sinai, God will establish a new Covenant which will be unconditional and unbreakable. The precepts of the new Covenant will not be external Commandments but laws inscribed in the hearts of people. Prophet Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who followed the footsteps of Prophet Isaiah, narrate the precepts of the new Covenant. *“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.... 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.... they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; ... Thus says the LORD: ‘If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the descendants of Israel for all that they have done, says the LORD”* (Jer 31, 31-37). The laws written in their hearts would serve as an inner force. The voice would aid them to live according to the will of God and to build a society founded on justice.

The same hope was rekindled by Prophet Ezekiel. *“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 tools God used to write the precepts of the new Covenant in the hearts of the people were their inner strength

and the Holy Spirit. People had the inner strength to observe the laws. The Holy Spirit will inspire and strengthen their resolve. When there is change in the hearts of people, there will be change in the society. To bring about change in society, man should change. When there is a change of heart, injustice and violence will come to an end.

God saw that people needed a change of heart and this was promised through the prophets. The Old Testament books, Prophetic books and the Psalms especially, confirmed that such a day of change would see the light of day.

To Live on the Holy Mountain

“O LORD, who shall sojourn in thy tent? Who shall dwell on thy holy hill?” (Ps 15, 1)

Our focus next is the Teachings about Social Justice found in the Wisdom Literature, especially in the Psalms. The ideas contained in these books are not much different from the teachings in the Prophetic books. Here too the exhortations are centered on the attitude and the conduct expected of the People who are His chosen people and the object of His special love. Great emphasis is given to the love of God. Inspired by the love of God, people will develop the behavior needed in the society.

Everyone aspires for life eternal, overflowing with peace and happiness. God alone can grant us unending joy, unbounded love and eternal life. To deserve it, one has to remain close to God. To be with God is the basic need of all the people. The human soul yearns for God and has an ardent desire to be with Him. This is the theme found in the very first pages of the Bible. This longing for God is seen clearly in the Paradise and more so when the Paradise is lost following man’s disobedience.

The truth that we all thirst for God is brought out in the soliloquy of St Augustine. *“Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: How late have I loved you! And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there... You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath*

and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours” (St. Augustine, Confessions). In a way, all the religions of the world speak of the yearnings the human soul for such an experience. Besides, this is the very foundation of Justice.

Man, who longs for the divine presence, desires to be with God all the time even while in the mortal body. People, therefore, keep looking for some earthly form of the invisible God. Driven by this need, they create certain places, things and structures and institutions to serve as symbols. One such arrangement is the temple. Faith and feelings have grown to the extent that a temple is regarded as a place where God dwells on earth. Such a view is found in the Bible also.

Moses constructed a box to preserve the Tablets containing the Ten Commandments. It was called “the Ark of the Covenant”. Through the Commandments, God dwells in the midst of His people and communicates His will to them. Those who live in conformity with the precepts of the Covenant would experience the presence of God. This is how the Ark of the Covenant became the dwelling place of God. The seat placed above the Ark came to be viewed as the throne of God and called the Seat of Mercy. The two Angels on both sides of the Seat of Mercy were, in people’s conviction, the servants of God. Again, to the people, the wings of the angels were the wings of God which protected the people.

The tent, built to keep the Ark of the Covenant, was called “The Tent of Meeting”, which means the place where God and man meet. The Tent was considered as the “House of God”. During their journey through the wilderness the Tent and the Ark went ahead of the people to guide them and to show them the places where they were to halt and

erect their tents. Even after reaching the Promised Land, the Tent and the Ark were kept in different places. When David captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites, the Ark was brought to Jerusalem. Solomon, who became king after David, built the Temple in the place of the Tent and placed the Ark in the Temple. Thus, Jerusalem became the Holy Mountain and the Temple, the House of God.

Thereafter those who sought the presence of God came to Jerusalem as pilgrims. Residing in the court of the Temple was regarded as the fulfilment of a devotee's life. The devotees longed to stay there forever. There are six Psalms known as Cantic of Zion (Ps 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122). The pilgrims sang it again and again and expressed their desire to live in the House of God forever.

“I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the LORD!” (Ps 122, 1). “How lovely is thy dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the LORD; ... 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, 1-10). Being in the Temple meant being with the Lord. The mountain where the Temple stood was considered as the “Mountain of the Lord”. It was the life-long dream of a devotee to be in the House of the Lord and dwell there forever.

People came to Jerusalem, traveling a long distance and suffering much pain, just to be with God. They brought gifts to offer to the Lord. However, a person could not just climb the temple hill without the necessary preparation. There were some restrictions about visiting the Holy Mountain. The entrance was located below the Temple Mountain. The priests and the Levites stood at the entrance giving directions to the pilgrims who come to experience the presence of God. The verse quoted at the beginning of

this chapter is taken from one of the psalms that narrate the conditions climbing the temple mount.

Psalm 15 is known as a wisdom Psalm and is related to worship. The Psalm while explaining who is worthy to climb the mountain where the House of God stood provides some clear lessons about Social Justice. When God appeared on Mount Sinai, people were given clear instructions. They were warned that anyone going near the mountain would die. One needed to be holy to go into the presence of God (Ex 19, 9-15. 20-23). Psalm 15 contains such instructions.

The Psalm was originally composed as a response of the priest to the questions raised by the pilgrims. But now the Psalm is used as a prayer song during church services. Even today the Psalm makes up the introduction to the Holy Mass in the Syro-Malabar rite. Till a few years ago, this Psalm was sung in almost all the Masses. Not so anymore, because different Psalms are included in the Liturgy to express the spirit of various Liturgical seasons. A close study of Psalm 15 will be very useful for understanding the Biblical notion of Social Justice because the spirit of justice reverberates throughout the Psalm.

Repeating an idea more than once is a common practice in the Hebrew tradition, especially in the poems, primarily to clarify its meaning and to emphasize a specific point. This literary device is called '*Synonymous parallelism*'. Similarly, dwelling on the different aspects of an issue is called "*Synthetic parallelism*", again used for the same purpose, to clarify the issue fully. Both of these literary forms have been employed in Psalm 15.

Question

Lord, "Who shall sojourn in thy tent? Who shall dwell on thy holy hill?" Obviously, "Thy tent" that the Psalmist

refers to is the Temple in Jerusalem and the “Holy Hill” is the city of Jerusalem or Mount Zion. In short, the issue in question is who is worthy to enter the Temple, or even to enter the sacred precincts. All those visiting the Temple to celebrate the festival should be thoroughly familiar with the response of the priest.

Answer

“He who walks blamelessly, and does what is right, and speaks truth from his heart; who does not slander with his tongue, and does no evil to his friend, nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor; in whose eyes a reprobate is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change; who does not put out his money at interest, and does not take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved” (Ps 15, 2-5).

Biblical Scholars differ in their views about the division of these verses. The ‘Ten Commandments’ are the fundamental laws of Israel. The response of the priest contains ten precepts almost in line with the Ten Commandments. However, a closer examination of the original version in Hebrew reveals a structure. The response contains 12 precepts in all, behaviors one should observe and behaviors one should avoid, to be worthy to come into the presence of the Lord. They fall into 4 sections with 3 items in each section. The similar ones have been clubbed together. Given below is the list as it appears in the original version in Hebrew.

- A. What one must do
1. Live blamelessly
 2. Act only according to justice
 3. Speak the truth

- B. Avoid
 - 1. Gossiping
 - 2. Hurting others
 - 3. Character assassination
- C. What one must do
 - 1. Avoid the company of the wicked
 - 2. Respect those who fear the Lord
 - 3. Fulfill the promises
- D. Avoid
 - 1. Breaking promises
 - 2. Imposing interest on loan
 - 3. Accepting bribe

In the translations, Sections C and D appear as a single commandment. “Fulfill promises even suffering a loss”. But in the original they are presented as two commandments.

C. 3. Fulfill the promises even suffering loss

D. 1. He will not break the promise no matter what happens.

By expressing the same idea in two different ways, its importance is stressed.

One who Lives Blamelessly

This is an introductory sentence. It points to a life that is blameless in front of God and the law. It means a person no one can find fault with. The situation is somewhat like when an animal is brought for sacrifice. In the case of an animal, the focus is on external blemish, while in the case of a person, the focus is on internal purity. One needs to

be holy to come into the presence of the Lord. He must be one who obeys all the rules diligently.

One who acts according to Justice

The Hebrew origin is “sedaqa” which means to obey all the Commandments and to carry out strictly all the responsibilities towards God, towards other people, towards the universe and towards oneself. This is a general regulation. After stating the law in general terms, the elements of the law are specified. Only a person who acts justly is eligible to enter the Temple. This would remind us of the call of Prophet Amos, “*Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*” (Am 5, 24).

One who says the Truth

Truth has to characterize all of our actions. Value is attached, not to external observance, but to motivations, attitudes and feelings underlying the action. There should be conformity between thoughts and words, goals and actions, inner self and outward behavior. This is what communicating with utter sincerity is all about. Hypocrisy could creep in easily into any sphere of our life, including the religious sphere. This precept makes it totally unacceptable.

Take off the mask and be the person who you really are. Speak what is in your heart and be sincere in your words and deeds. Falsehood cannot go near God who is Truth. For example, the Hindu custom of wearing only the loin cloth by the devotee is a symbolic, external expression of this precept. No one can hide anything from the One who sees everything. Jesus ran into conflict with those who claimed to be ‘holy’ while in truth they were not. Jesus denounced them as ‘hypocrites’ for pretending to be holy and looking down on the ordinary people.

One who does not Gossip

Our social life and conversations should be guided by

truth. This precept forbids speaking against others behind their back. The precept, though expressed in the negative form, carries a positive message, a call to show respect towards each other. “*Do not say anything adverse about others*” is a law that will be valid at all times.

In the Sermon on the Mountain, Jesus includes this Commandment as part of the New Testament laws of righteousness. The law was explained in clear, forceful words. “*I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire*” (Mt 5, 22). Gossips contribute, in no small measure, to promotion of injustice and violence in the society. We can easily recognize the harm gossips cause among people. A minor misunderstanding, triggered by a baseless rumor, can develop into a major altercation, causing untold damage to relationships and peace in the society.

Censure of gossip is not to be interpreted as disapproval of feedback, especially negative feedback. In case of wrongdoings by others, Jesus has told us clearly how we should go about dealing with the matter. “*If your brother sins against you go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*” (Mt 18, 15-17).

We are not to point out mistakes and shortcomings of others in public. This will be viewed, and rightly so, as an insult. Shockingly, religious people, and not just political parties, are guilty of indulging in gossips and spreading

false rumors. They have failed to pay heed to the warning of the Psalmist that people who gossip would have no right to come anywhere close to a church or a Temple. Had people refrained from gossiping about others, the world would have been spared of many conflicts and disasters.

The injunction ‘Do not gossip’ has huge implications. ‘Do not hurt the friend’, ‘Do not spread rumors about your neighbor’, ‘Do not insult others’, ‘Do not indulge in character-assassination’, ‘Remain faithful to friends’, ‘Never hurt anyone for any reason’ are all implied in this precept.

Avoid the company of the Wicked

This directive deserves special attention. There is a popular maxim, ‘If one makes money shamelessly, the money would eliminate the shame’. But the precept, “*The wicked should be avoided*”, teaches us the opposite. The wicked should not be held in honor. The term ‘wicked’ occurs in the Bible in several places and denotes a person who is the opposite of a just person.

Words found in the Wisdom books, especially words in the Psalms have many nuances. Wickedness is an attitude which starts from the heart, “*The wicked man conceives evil, and is pregnant with mischief, and brings forth lies*” (Ps 7, 14). That would lead to the rejection of God (Ps 10, 2; 36, 1); persecution of the poor and earning wealth through unjust ways (Ps 17, 1; 22, 16) and living in luxury. Through evil ways they attain power and position. They tend to be proud, arrogant and vain. They praise themselves and pretend to be bigger than they are (Ps 10, 2; 37, 16; 55, 3; 73, 2-12; 75, 4-5). Besides, the wicked person thinks that there is no God and therefore tends to focus only on matters of this world. He forgets that he will have to give an account of his life before his Creator when he dies (Ps 17, 13-14; 36,1).

The Psalms provide us a clear picture of wickedness and of the wicked persons. The wicked have to be shunned, and not honored by any chance. We might be tempted to view their high positions with admiration. We may even be envious of their good fortunes. The fact is that whatever they possess can be lost in a moment. The just should develop right thoughts and perspectives, and adopt an appropriate conduct to be regarded worthy of coming into the presence of God.

Moving from the realm of attitudes to the world of action, three exhortations are made: 1) Keep the promises made. 2) Do not take interest for the loan. 3) Do not accept bribe.

1. *Keep the promises made*

One should honor a promise at any cost. A person should think twice before making a promise. No one is obliged to make a promise, more so, if the promise cannot be fulfilled. At times, carrying out promises wrongly made might cause more harm than good such as Judge Jephthah sacrificing his daughter (Jgs 11, 30-40) and King Herod beheading John the Baptist (Mk 6, 14-29)

2. *Do not take interest for the loan*

This is, no doubt, a debatable matter. In today's world, financial transactions, like depositing money into the bank, or lending or borrowing money, involve interest payments as a matter of course. There is no indication whatsoever of the system getting abolished anytime soon. Therefore, as of now, the precept does not seem practical. Is it for this reason, there is a little change in the Psalm sung during the Mass.? There is an addition of the word 'unjust', and now the precept reads as 'Do not take unjust interest'. Some may feel that the addition is unwarranted.

The practice of taking loans to do business is a recent

phenomenon. This was not in vogue when the Psalm was written. Hence the precept is to be regarded as applicable to unofficial personal loans among people, and not to commercial loans from banks.

The Psalmist was possibly having in mind personal loans taken for emergency purposes, such as illness, loss of livelihood, or any such contingency. The prohibition by the Psalmist seems to be about making money by exploiting people who are in distress. Nonetheless, the matter of interest cannot just be dismissed. The original word used was ‘usury’, which means ‘a high rate of interest’. So, what is prohibited is not interest itself, but an unjust rate of interest. May be this is why the addition of ‘unjust interest’ has been introduced in the liturgical text.

It is important to note that Jesus took this issue to a higher level. He said, “*Lend, (money) expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish*” (Lk 6, 35). Jesus exhorts us to help those in need, not just by lending, but by donating the required sum freely. Any surprise that those who make money by exploiting the poor are to be counted among the wicked! They can never dare to come anywhere close to the Temple. We see the poor among us fighting for their survival. How can we entertain thoughts of beautifying churches or holding grandiose celebrations without first taking care of the poor and needy? A just society would have by now been a reality, had we all adhered to the precepts of the Psalmist and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

3. *Do not take Bribe*

The last of the conditions laid down for gaining entry into the Temple is ‘not taking a bribe’. Bribe is generally used to get what one does not deserve. But, strangely, to-day bribe is demanded even to process routine matters and

rightful payments. One wonders how this culture of bribe has developed in our country despite the fact that those rendering various services are paid a regular salary. Poor example by leaders is a major factor. The law-makers themselves demand and accept bribes. In these circumstances, the Psalmist warns that the act of worship can turn into an affront to God! *“You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right”* (Ex 23, 8). This was part of the precepts of the Covenant.

In short, those who fail to act justly cannot come into the presence of God. Jesus put forth the same precept as a condition not only for presenting an acceptable offering to God (Mt 5,23-24) but also for the Last Judgment (Mt 25, 31-46). Our prayers and worship and all other spiritual exercises should help us to live a life based on justice. People have a right to know the directives and the warnings provided by the Word of God. Those in power in the Church Hierarchy have the duty to teach the people about the principles of justice. Failure to do so may be one of the reasons for the spread of injustice in our society.

Part II

**Social Justice -
New Testament**

23

Justice – Result of Conversion

“Bear fruits that befit repentance” (Lk 3, 8).

The old Covenant is fulfilled in the new Covenant. He stood between promises and fulfillment. He came on the scene at a pivotal point where the Old Testament gives way to the New Testament. Even before his birth, he was called the prophet of the Most High. While in the womb of his mother, recognizing the presence of the Savior, he leapt with joy, filled as he was with the Holy Spirit. From the time of his youth, he endured the harsh life of the wilderness. By constant fasting, he disciplined his body. He was the one who came to prepare the way for the Savior. The reference is to John the Baptist.

John stood at the crossroads of time, imbibing the spirit of the Old Testament and opening the way to the New Testament. This is what Jesus had to say about him, *“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John”* (Lk 7, 28). John announced the coming of the new age. Because of his fiery language and the austere life he led, people thought that Elijah, the prophet of fire, had come back to the earth.

The life of John the Baptist, his teachings and his call, are all very important for the study of Social Justice in the Bible. The Evangelists position his teachings as a preface to the establishment of Social Justice in the Kingdom of God. At the same time, John’s message could be considered as the essence of the Old Testament teachings about Justice.

John announced that the Messiah, whom the people were waiting for centuries, would come soon. His mission was to prepare the people to accept the Messiah. The angel who announced John's birth had given a clue to his mission. The angel's message, so different from people's thinking, is very relevant to Social Justice. *"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).

The central point was the 'communion of hearts'. The spirit of unity should start within the family, the basic unit of the society. There should be bonding between parents and children, and among the children themselves. To bring this about, a conversion of heart is necessary. The conversion, in turn, begins with reconciliation with God. However, to be at peace with God, one has to be at peace first with one's fellow human beings. If there is peace in our hearts, there will be unity in the family, unity between families and unity in the society at large. The society will then be a community functioning on the principles of justice. This was the mission entrusted to John the Baptist. He was to establish social justice through the conversion of hearts and prepare the way for the coming of the Son of God.

John the Baptist fulfilled his mission by his life and teachings and by his death as well. His mission had been entrusted to him through the Angel even before he was born. He chose to suffer the austerity of the wilderness. *"And 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). What is not apparent in this narration is his rigorous training by way of preparation. To prepare the way for the Lord, he had to first prepare himself. In

this endeavor, he was guided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Finally, he lost his life for speaking against injustice.

The life of John the Baptist was itself a great lesson in Social Justice. He avoided tasty food, luxuries and an easy life, but spent his youth in the wilderness. By so doing, he readied himself to face any hardship. His life style was truly a witness to a prophetic life. He stayed for a while with the religious group called Essene on the Western bank of the Dead Sea, Qumran. He then left the monastery and lived all alone in the wilderness, listening to the voice of God. Depriving himself of all the comforts and conveniences and living on a meager food, he disciplined his body and learned to control his emotions and to overcome temptations. This is how John the Baptist, the precursor to Jesus, prepared himself to accomplish the mission entrusted to him.

When the appointed time came, John began his mission. In the wilderness of Judea on the banks of Jordan, his voice reverberated: “*Prepare the way*”. This was his main message. “*As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’*” (Lk 3, 4). John announced that the day of the Lord was at hand. He warned the people that the Savior was coming to judge. Just as it happened in Sodom and Gomorrah, sulfur and fire would fall upon them, if they continued with their old ways without change of heart. God destroyed those cities and, in their place today exists the Dead Sea.

Those who heard John were reminded of Prophet Elijah. Their hearts were filled with fear as they knew the prophecy about the return of Elijah who had been taken up in a chariot of fire. “*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 chil-*

dren and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse” (Mal 4, 5-6).

Hearing that the Day of Judgment was at hand, people rushed to the bank of River Jordan. John the Baptist was proclaiming his message with great fervor and passion. *“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?” (Mt 3, 7).* John was rebuking the leaders of the society, the Pharisees and Sadducees, calling them “brood of vipers”. Vipers are the symbol of crookedness and cheating. They are poisonous snakes. Nobody can say where and when they will appear. Again, vipers have no ears (in fact no snake has the capacity to hear) and so John reprimands them for closing their ears to the voice of God. Instead of listening to the Word of God and repenting, they were seeking security in rituals and celebrations.

People came to John to escape the wrath of God but their attitude and actions were not conducive for a change of heart. John warned them about three things: 1) They were observing rituals without a change of heart. 2) They were under the illusion that they were chosen by God and by virtue of their birth they were the heirs of God’s Kingdom. 3) They had an erroneous notion that the judgment would not happen soon and so there was no urgency for repentance and conversion of hearts.

The ritual consisted mainly of immersing in the water in the presence of John the Baptist. But, without change of heart, mere immersion in water any number of times in any number of rivers, will not help. When the bushes are on fire, the snakes run looking for water. In the same way, hearing the words of John the Baptist, people rushed to Jordan to be baptized by him. Immersion alone will not save anyone. In order to be saved, they, who claim to be the

descendants of Abraham, should develop the kind of faith and obedience that Abraham had. John warned, *“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”* (Mt 3, 10). To avoid being thrown into the fire, they have to prove, through their actions, that they have repented and have converted.

“The multitudes asked him, ‘What then shall we do?’ And John answered them, ‘He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise” (Lk 3, 10). Conversion has to start at the level of basic needs. The change in attitude should be expressed through action. They must make sure that all in the society have food, clothes and a place to stay. Those who have two dresses must donate one of them to the one who has none. Those having food must share it with those needing food. John was striking at the very root of injustice. When the neighbor is in distress, without food and clothes, amassing wealth would be a grave sin. Such injustice is sure to invite God’s displeasure and punishment.

Share what you have, not under compulsion, but willingly. This requires a change in perspective and an awareness that God has willed the products of the earth to be available to all on earth. Possession of most of the goods by a few is an unforgivable crime. Needs of my neighbor impose limits on my rights. Sharing food and clothes is just a beginning. The teaching makes two things clear: (1) My rights have limitations and boundaries. After taking care of my needs, I must be able to say ‘This is enough for me’. Attachment to wealth and luxuries which obstructs others from meeting their needs would have to be considered an offence. (2) If I donate something to those in need out of my wealth, I am not doing anything special, worthy of great praise, but merely carrying out my duty.

The advice given to the tax collectors and the soldiers of the Roman Empire enlighten us about another aspect of justice. Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and one of them asked John, *“Teacher, what shall we do? And he said to them, “Collect no more than is appointed you”.* Soldiers also asked John, *“And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages”* (Lk 3, 12-14). Tax collection and peace-keeping are essential tasks for the management of a society. All citizens must co-operate with the officials to maintain peace and to ensure justice. However, it will be improper for the Government officials to misuse the system to exploit the people or for the citizens to evade paying the legitimate taxes to the Government.

John was not advocating a restructuring of the political, economic and social set up but to operate the systems in a fair manner. Justice can be administered within the existing structures. Change is not absolutely necessary. But a change of heart is essential, based on the awareness that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Conversion alone would bring about radical changes in our life and society. Should this not happen, there will be a big disaster. John issued his warnings about the dangers in store by employing different symbols like axe, winnowing fan and fire. Whatever was done by John was a mere preparation for the real Savior. The Savior would come after John.

John’s mission was to bear witness with his life and to offer guidance to eradicate injustice. King Herod grew scared, by merely hearing his voice because John had reproached him for marrying his brother’s wife. *“Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he shut up John in prison”* (Lk 3, 19-20). This was the voice of a prophet crying

for justice. John's protests ran on the same lines as those of Nathan and Elijah who had spoken against David and Ahab. John was not a coward. He harbored no fear for the wrath of the king. He did not take shelter in some secret hideout. Rather he was moving about freely in the country, knowing full well the possible consequences for reproving the king's behavior and calling him to repentance.

Fearing that her future was under threat, Heredia acted shrewdly. Through her daughter she demanded the head of John who was in prison. Herod was not strong enough to reject the unjust request; instead he ordered the head of John to be given to the girl on a platter. John who fought for justice lost his head.

The ideal of social justice depicted by John the Baptist is here complete. His example can be followed by anybody. He is someone who accomplished so much with the little he had, in such a short time. He lived a life of simplicity, avoiding luxury and extravagance. If everyone follows John's example, there will be enough for all to live, grow and prosper. Besides, John turned to God with his whole heart, rather than getting lured into rituals. He promoted universal brotherhood by advocating love for all. Empowered by prophetic courage, he admonished the king to act justly. These are but a few of the many lessons about social justice one can learn from the life of John the Baptist.

Life is the Message

“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head” (Lk 9, 58).

The study of ‘Social Justice in the Bible’ reaches its climax in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, God Incarnate. Jesus taught His lessons, not so much through words, but through His life. Any study on social justice must start with His life.

Nothing happened in His life accidentally; it was all prepared by God and foretold through the prophets. Nothing in His life was said or done under compulsion, like force of circumstances or absence of any other alternative. The singular force that guided the life of Jesus was the Will of God. He has said, *“My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work”* (Jn 4, 34; see also Lk 22, 34; Mt 26, 53-54). The life of Jesus was a life of total obedience to the Will of the Father. His life from the cattle shed to Calvary was the execution of the salvation project and a manifestation of the love of God. In every one of his actions we can recognize the exercise of social justice.

The plan of salvation was revealed over a period of time. Everything began with the Angel announcing the birth of Jesus to Mary. Mary was a young village woman betrothed to Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth. The people of Israel believed that the Savior would be born as a king, as the Son of David, in Bethlehem, the city of David. This belief was based on the teachings of the Prophets and the

promises made to the Patriarchs. The fact that Jesus was born in the line of David was a partial fulfillment of that expectation. However, people never ever expected Him to be born as the son of a carpenter from Nazareth, an obscure little village in Galilee of Palestine.

Some argue that Joseph was no ordinary carpenter. The original Greek word ‘teckton’ carries two different meanings, one meaning being an ordinary carpenter and the other, a royal carpenter. The royal carpenter constructed palaces, temples and houses for the high officials in the kingdom. St Joseph, some say, was the main architect of the city of Tiberias. He was also the one who built the palace of Herod Antipas when he moved the capital of Galilee from Sephoris to Tiberias. These claims are debatable, to say the least, as there is no evidence in support, except in some apocryphal literature. However, going by the Gospels we can say that Jesus, who took over the job of His father Joseph, was just an ordinary carpenter.

The humble beginnings were all a matter of deliberate choice. Jesus and his father Joseph were hard working carpenters who lived by the income from their work. Jesus was determined to live the life of an ordinary man in fulfillment of the command of God as recorded in the book of Genesis, *“In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”* (Gen 3, 19). Perhaps it was by keeping this injunction in mind that St. Paul wrote, *“If anyone will not work, let him not eat”* (2 Thes 3, 10). Everyone has the right and the responsibility to work and to make a living. Creating the required conditions for all people to be able to work and to earn an income is a crucial aspect of Social Justice.

It was His choice to be born outside the city, in a cave which was the shelter for cattle. *“She gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them*

in the inn” (Lk 2, 7). King David had sojourned in Bethlehem. Prophet Micah had prophesied that the Messiah would be born 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” (Micah 5, 2). But nobody had anticipated that the place would be cattle shed. Of course, we know that God sees not the way man sees. The wise men who came searching for the ‘King of the Jews’ got lost precisely because they looked for him in the palace of the king. The message is clear. Whatever man regards as valuable and precious might not have much value in the eyes of God.

Jesus assumed the life of refugees who would have to flee from place to place to save their lives. *“An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him”. And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt” (Mt 2, 13-14). Jesus had to suffer untold hardships due to the mindless orders of the people in power. The difficulties the Holy Family endured were cruelties heaped on them by unjust men but they accepted them as part of God’s plan. Their nocturnal journey was in fulfillment of the prophesy: “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos11, 1). A grave injustice no doubt, but it is a story of Jesus and His family sharing the life of the oppressed refugees in the world.*

“He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart” (Lk 2, 51). Jesus learned carpentry from His father and made a living as a carpenter. That is how He came to be known as the carpenter from Nazareth (Mk 6, 3). Until He began his public ministry, He continued life as

a carpenter. Through His own life, Jesus demonstrated the dignity of labor and the value of hard work. Great lessons indeed about Social Justice!

When Jesus received Baptism in the River Jordan, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended in the form a dove and rested on Him. The voice of the Father was heard from heaven, “*Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased*” (Mk 1, 11). This was the start of His public ministry. Anointed by the Holy Spirit and acclaimed by the Father, Jesus began His mission. His very first decision revealed His attitude about Social Justice.

He fasted for forty days in preparation for His mission. This way, Jesus identified himself with those who are victims of hunger and thirst. However, the fasting gave rise to a temptation to make bread and to use it to capture power and authority.

Jesus was aware that though bread was needed, food for the soul was far more important. He made this clear in His response to the temptation. He has also warned us not to become a slave of bread. Bread, no doubt, is one of our basic needs. Everyone must work hard to earn one’s bread. However, accepting bread without working and not being given bread after working are unjust situations. Jesus said to the tempter, “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (Mt 4, 4).

Jesus was quite conscious of the temptation to work miracles and to perform wondrous deeds to impress people. By so doing, He could have easily established His authority over them. However, He was also aware of the hidden dangers, and so Jesus admonished the tempter not to test God (Mt 4, 7). Indirectly, Jesus made it known that He regarded any attempt at establishing control over fellow human beings as satanic, as it invariably resulted in injus-

tice (Mt 4, 10). The right path was the path of love, sacrifice and suffering. Jesus chose the path of justice through the Cross.

Who are the people who serve Jesus? The persons who proclaim and nurture the Kingdom of God that Jesus had founded. The first members of the Kingdom of God had to walk the path of the cross and adopt a simple life style like Jesus had done. The first disciples of Jesus were not exactly very poor as they owned boats, nets and hired hands. Peter, for example, the leader of the disciples, is reported to have had a large house with eight rooms in Capernaum, if we go by the findings of the archeologists. Jesus called him rock, though he was more like wax, prone to melt easily. All those who responded to the call of Jesus, abandoned all that they had and followed Him empty-handed (Mk 1, 16-20; 10, 28). This was the life that Jesus had embraced.

From the very beginning Jesus made it clear that those who choose to become His disciples must live by His values and His principles. He Himself had no financial security after leaving behind His carpentry shop. Jesus and His followers would not have even the security of the birds that have nests and of the animals that have caves. How would they live then? What resources did they have?

Jesus who had no place to lay His head knew that He was the Son of the Creator of heaven and earth. He called God, Father and by teaching His followers to do likewise, He made them grasp the truth about Himself. Faith in God, the Creator of heaven and earth, is the foundation of social justice. All the structures, the laws and the projects of social justice evolve and take shape around this basic truth.

Jesus taught His disciples, by His words and deeds, that even if they had nothing, the Father would take care of all their needs. God's care could be recognized in several different things, including the banquets that Jesus and the

disciples attended. Incidentally, Jesus never refused any invitation for a meal. He availed of all such opportunities to establish peace and unity among the people. By participating in the banquets of Mathew, the tax collector and Simon the Pharisee, Jesus was striving to build a community based on justice. Many of the banquets and meals resulted in the conversion of hearts. These table fellowships turned out to be platforms for driving home the basic lessons of Social Justice.

It is known that Jesus was never impressed by the rich or the powerful. He had no fear of them either. In fact, He spoke to the Pharisees sternly, *“You cannot serve God and mammon. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they scoffed at him. But He said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts; ...the kingdom of God is preached, and every one enters it violently”* (Lk 16, 13-16. 19-31). He regarded accumulated wealth not as a sign of blessing but as a product of injustice, and warned them about the curse it would bring on them. *“What is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God”* (Lk 16, 15).

The Pharisees once warned Jesus, *“Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”* But Jesus said to them, *“Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem’* (Lk 13, 31-33). Jesus displayed the same attitude towards the Romans who were seen as having dominion over the entire world, *“You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore, he who delivered me to you has the greater sin”* (Jn 19, 11). To the Pharisees who came to trick him about the issue of taxes, Jesus said, *“Render to*

Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mk 12, 17). What does Caesar have that does not belong to God? If there is nothing, it is tantamount to saying that no one else matters except God. Of course, Caesar, for that matter all political authority, has a place in the plan of God as one entrusted with the task of providing protection and justice to the people.

Those who heard Jesus had concluded that Jesus did not acknowledge the authority of Caesar. In fact, sometime later, they accused Him saying, "*We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ and king*" (Lk 23, 2). Jesus had told them that all the authority comes from God and therefore the authority of this world could function only by accepting the authority of God. The origin of social justice is in acknowledging the absolute authority of God.

It was not surprising that Jesus' teachings ran into problems. He confronted their accusations and rejections, machinations and attempts to murder Him, very boldly. One who entered Jerusalem triumphantly, seated on a borrowed donkey and accompanied by a great number of people, emerged out of the city four days later, carrying a cross. It was a procession of joy and sorrow! It was a procession of sorrow for the women of Jerusalem who witnessed the plight of Jesus. Naturally, they lamented over His ordeal. But for the enemies of Jesus, it was a victory procession. The plaque, carried in front of the procession, had this inscription: "*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*". It was also a procession of joy to those who could see beyond the Cross: the symbolic celebration of Life triumphing over death, love of God overcoming sin and justice defeating injustice.

Jesus shook up the value system of the day with His

teachings and actions. His message was that all the products of the earth are a gratuitous gift of God meant for all the people of the world. Wealth is not to be accumulated but to be shared with those in need. Authority is not to be used to lord over others but to serve them. Jesus said, ‘The greatest among you is the one who is at the bottom of the social pyramid’. Giving is better than receiving. Life is stronger than death. Poverty is not a curse but a sign of God’s blessing. All these profound truths have their origin in the life of Jesus. With such principles as the base, Jesus put forward His new teachings about Social Justice. We shall discuss His teachings next.

25

The Justice of the Kingdom of God

“Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt 6, 33).

What is the good news that Jesus proclaimed? The answer is, “***The Kingdom of God***”. Jesus came into the world to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. This was evident in His life and teachings. The call to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (justice) shows that these two elements are closely interrelated. Justice is part of the Kingdom of God and social justice is an important element in the idea of justice.

Soon after receiving Baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness. After 40 days of intense fasting and prayer, and having defeated the tempter, He returned to Galilee, determined to submit Himself entirely to the will of God. The evangelist Mark conveys Jesus’ message succinctly: “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news*” (Mk 1, 15).

This can be regarded as a fair summary of the teachings of Jesus. There are two proclamations and two invitations. The first proclamation is this that the time of salvation for which not only the people of Israel but the whole world had been waiting has come with the coming of Jesus. The waiting is over. The second proclamation is that the Kingdom of God has come near. This is nothing but a confirmation of

the first proclamation. The original word in Greek is ‘egg-iken’, which is translated as ‘has come near’. The proclamation highlights the presence of the Kingdom of God. It is like saying to someone who is still asleep at dawn, ‘Get up and open the window, the sun has risen!’

What was eagerly waited for has become a reality. Jesus urged His audience often, through His words and deeds, to recognize the presence of the Kingdom of God (Lk 11, 20; 17, 21; 6, 20). What is this Kingdom of God? The people of Israel were waiting for an Empire resembling that of King David and King Solomon. This new Kingdom would be free to administer its social, economic and political affairs independently. What the people had hoped for was the establishment of a nation, free from foreign rule and enjoying complete freedom. However, Jesus’ vision was very different and extended far beyond the socio-political and the economic freedom that the people had in mind.

The Kingdom of God does not refer to any particular territory or people. It is a dynamic reality to which everyone has been called. Isaiah 52,7 provides a brief description of the Kingdom. *“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).* In the eyes of the Prophet, Jerusalem appears as a mother, weeping over her children who were defeated in the war and were taken away as slaves to Babylon. The mother is now waiting in tears, not knowing when they would be able to return back, if ever. These narrations provide valuable insights about the Kingdom of God and about the Gospel.

Someone who came running from the battle field conveyed the good news to the mother who was crying for her children, thinking mistakenly that she had lost everything. He said, *‘Mal’ak Yahweh’* (‘Yahweh is king’ or ‘Yahweh

rules’). Babylon, who had captured Jerusalem, the city of Yahweh and burned down the Temple, the house of God, and deported many of her children as slaves, has now been defeated in the war. The Prophet’s vision was that God Himself fought against the enemies of His people Israel and has won the war for them. God has established His rule over all the enemies of Israel. This was the good news announced by the Prophet. From now on, the people will be ruled not by Babylon but by God. We can now grasp the concept of the “Kingdom of God” more clearly. Kingdom of God stands for the Rule of God and not a specific territory or a people.

The Good News is that God now rules and executes His will on earth. Evangelist Mark starts his Gospel with these words: “*The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*” (Mk 1, 1). The Kingdom of God is a reality brought into the world by Jesus. This is evident in the words and deeds of Jesus. Jesus asked the people to respond to His call to **repent** and to **believe** in the Good News. These two invitations are also closely related and they need to be studied carefully.

The term ‘repent’ is the translation of the Greek word ‘*metanoiete*’. The Greek word implies a change of mind. A change of heart is what is intended. The call to repentance requires a person to admit his wrongdoings and to feel contrite for them. Admitting the wrongdoings will not suffice, but the person should be prepared to abandon his old ways. This involves a radical change in his life. The change should be reflected in his actions. Change of heart involves embracing a new attitude, taking on new goals and values. One has to adopt a conduct that corresponds to the principles of God’s rule. For this to happen, one needs to develop a deep faith. This is the aim of the second part of the call. One has to believe that the Son of God has come into the world in the person of Jesus Christ.

Conversion and faith would bring about radical changes in one's life, personal and social. Such a change is a pre-condition for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus revealed the mystery of God's Kingdom by His words and deeds and made it a reality here on earth. He exhorted the people to make radical changes in their lives. The "Sermon on the Mount" contains this message. "*But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*" (Mt 6, 33). All the aspects of justice to be observed in the Kingdom of God are outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes illustrate clearly the attitudes to be cultivated to make the Kingdom of God a reality on earth (Mt 5, 3-12).

Being poor in spirit mean to realize that all what one is and one has belongs to God. This would motivate him to share what he has with those in need. The realization that one is not the owner of anything but just a steward, would prevent him from falling into the temptation of greed. All the things in the word belong to God alone and are to be used according to His will. Such a perspective is sure to contribute to spread of social justice.

To be qualified as a member of the Kingdom of God, many conditions have to be fulfilled. First of all, one has to have a thirst for justice, and remove all traces of unfairness in one's life or in the society. Second, one has to deal with everybody with humility and kindness and keep one's heart pure, free of selfishness. Finally, one has to maintain peace by upholding justice and being willing to suffer for its sake.

Jesus's teachings about justice went far beyond what the Old Testament had prescribed. "*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*" (Mt 5, 20). Jesus clarified his message through several examples.

For instance, let us consider the Fifth Commandment,

“You shall not kill”. What is prohibited is not merely physical killing but also keeping enmity, feeling of hatred, speaking ill of others, or engaging in character assassination. Only when we are fully reconciled with all the people in our lives, do we become acceptable to God (Mt 5, 21-30).

Family is the basic unit of a society. Speaking of the Sixth commandment, Jesus asks us to avoid anything that could damage the sanctity of the family. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery”* (Mt 5, 27-32). By emphasizing that anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has committed adultery, we can see to what great heights Jesus has taken the tenets of morality.

Truthfulness is an essential requirement for building a just society. Therefore, falsehood or distorting the truth, in speech or in action, is totally outlawed. Jesus has also spoken against swearing in any form. These are some of the implications of the Eighth commandment. *“Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one”* (Mt 5, 37).

The laws on revenge in the Old Testament were aimed at protecting life and property (Ex 21,23-25). The law of the Kingdom of God, however, transcends the old precepts, founded as it is on much loftier principles. According to this law, revenge has no place in life. Rather everyone should love one’s enemies and help them unconditionally. *“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those*

who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Mt 5, 44-45). The essence of the new morality is that the children of God must have the qualities of their heavenly Father. It is all summed up in the final advice: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5, 48).

Can a human being, who is just a creature of God, be as perfect as the Creator? ‘It is impossible’ would be the spontaneous response. But then, what did Jesus mean? Would He demand of us something which is beyond our capabilities? The Gospel of Luke phrases the injunction a little differently: *“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful”* (Lk 6, 36). This is surely well within our capabilities. We are not asked to resemble the Father in His omnipotence or omniscience, but merely in being merciful towards others as He is. Mercy and compassion are virtues, essential for creating a just society.

Social justice is not a goal that can be achieved by taking revenge or by waging war, but by keeping unconditional love and kindness in our relationships. In a society committed to love and kindness, justice will reign, the Kingdom of God would be a reality and all its members will be made the children of God.

The root cause of injustice in the world is greed. Greed is born of our worry about the future and of our futile attempt to find security in money. We do not realize that material wealth cannot provide us true, lasting security. Jesus illustrates this lesson through the parable of the rich farmer, who lost his life even while he was busy expanding his barns. Jesus rightly called him a fool. (Lk 12, 16-21). When we choose to repose our faith in the providence of God instead of in wealth, we experience peace and joy. We

also readily share what we have with those in need.

There are numerous motivations for amassing wealth. Wealth is thought to guarantee us positions of power in society. Jesus has, however, given us a totally different perspective of power and position. *“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, ... But it shall not be so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all”* (Mk 10, 42-44). Jesus went about setting an example during the Last Supper by washing the feet of His apostles. He then instructed them: *“If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you”* (Jn 13,14-15).

Jesus draws our attention to two great dangers present in material wealth. The biggest danger is that wealth tries to usurp the place of God and leads people away from God altogether. That is why St. Paul referred to greed for wealth as idol worship, *“Put to death therefore whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)”* (Col 3, 5). Jesus has warned us that wealth is a dangerous master, who is not content with anything less than total submission. *“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth”* (Mt 6, 24). Luke has expressed it a little differently: *“No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth”* (Lk 16, 13). In short, wealth is certain to take a man away from God, turning him into an atheist or an idol worshipper.

The second danger is the neglect of people, a sequel

to the neglect of God. How would anyone who does not acknowledge God as our Father accept others as brothers and sisters? Anyone who is focused on amassing wealth for himself is unlikely to care about the poor or the needy. It is no big secret that wealth makes people blind to the needs of others. The wealthy fail to bear in mind that whatever they have, after meeting their needs, should be placed in the service of others. Jesus has warned us through several examples that the rich risk becoming heartless and insensitive.

To be able to lead a life that Jesus advocates requires deep faith and the unshakeable belief that God is our Father and that He would provide for all of our needs. Jesus has assured us in a touching manner: *“Look at the birds: they do not sow seeds, gather a harvest, and put it in barns; yet your Father in heaven takes care of them! Aren’t you worth much more than birds?”* (Mt 6, 26). If we bear this assurance in mind, we shall know no worry or anxiety about the future.

Time and again, the Prophets have warned us that God will not accept sacrifices and prayers of those who lack kindness and generosity. Jesus has taken this warning a step higher: *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers”* (Mt 7, 21-23).

Jesus has also stressed repeatedly that entry into the Kingdom of God is not easily achieved. Diligent observance of laws alone would not suffice. The rich, in particular, face a bigger challenge. Jesus has said: *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a*

rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19,24). Clearly, the main obstacle appears to be greed for wealth. The rich young man asked Jesus what else he had to do to attain eternal life because he was already observing all the Commandments. “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mk 10, 21).

On several occasions, Jesus has reiterated that change of heart among the rich is an impossibility. Of course, what is impossible for man is possible for God (Mk 10,27). There are many examples in the Gospels of a camel going through the eye of the needle. Peter and the other disciples, for instance, left behind everything they had and followed Jesus. The case of Zacchaeus is another great story. Many had concluded that Zacchaeus was incapable of change because he was a tax collector and an officer of Rome. Jews regarded him as a traitor, an agent of the colonial power and so well beyond redemption. They were certain that he must have amassed his wealth by unfair means. But the mere presence of Jesus brought about a great transformation. Jesus said to him: *“Today salvation has come to this house”*. It appears that Zacchaeus also, like the good thief, stole his way into the Kingdom of God. The camel did go through the eye of the needle! A study of this incident will help understand how social justice becomes a reality.

Everything started when Zacchaeus first felt a strong urge to see Jesus who was passing through his town. There were many obstacles. First of all, he was short and so it would be difficult for him to see Jesus in the midst of a crowd. Not just small in stature, he was also a persona non-grata in the society, and so he must have felt apprehensive to be seen in public, and that too in an assembly connected with Jesus. However, he was determined to see

Jesus at any cost. His longing got the better of him, forcing him to take a lot of risks. He would have certainly known that climbing a tree was beneath the dignity of a high-ranking Roman official, but ultimately his desire to see Jesus prevailed. He ran ahead of the crowd and climbed on a sycamore tree. It was full of leaves and so he could hide himself among the leaves, but would be able to see Jesus passing beneath. He was instantly rewarded. On reaching the foot of the tree, Jesus looked up. Zacchaeus saw Jesus and his long-standing desire was finally fulfilled. However, the story does not end here.

It was Jesus who took the next step. *“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today”* (Lk 19, 5). With great joy he climbed down and ran home before Jesus to open all the doors for Him. Jesus and His disciples entered the house. He was ecstatic about having Jesus as a guest in his house.

The joy he felt gave rise to a new resolve. *“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”* (Lk 19, 8). Nobody had forced Zacchaeus into doing all this. It was a spontaneous gesture following the inner conversion wrought by the presence of Jesus. The process of the camel going through the eye of the needle was complete. Jesus in turn responded with great love and care, *“Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham”* (Lk 19, 9).

Here is a story of social justice established following a change of heart. Zacchaeus was changed after he savored the joy of God’s Kingdom. He must have realized that all the wealth he had earned meant nothing in comparison with the joy of being a member of God’s Kingdom. He got this far because he listened to the inspiration from above

and was willing to do whatever was required to have Jesus as His guest.

This is what the farmer, who found the treasure hidden in the field, did. So did the merchant who found the precious jewel. (Mt 13, 44-46). They knew the value of the treasure they had found and were willing to dispose of all their possessions to obtain it. Once a person tastes the joys of God's Kingdom, no more would he desire or care about money or wealth.

No price is too high to enter the Kingdom of God. It is this realization which makes conversion of heart possible. Conversion in turn inspires several other big changes. Some might even regard the convert as a fool; in the manner the Jewish leadership regarded Jesus: *"The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So, he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God"* (Lk 16, 14-15).

Only those who live by the Word of God will be able to see themselves and the society through the eyes of God. We shall also be inspired to share what we have with those in need. Jesus has taught us how to build a society where justice prevails. He has declared that our day-to-day decisions will have consequences for eternity. *"...Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me"* (Mt 25, 31-46).

The promise of eternal joy in heaven is a fundamental motivation for leading a just life. Everyone is called to share eternal life with God. The path to this goal is love of others and willingness to share what one has with those in need.

Jesus has placed before us the options of life and death,

heaven and hell. Every person has the power, the right and the responsibility to choose what he wants. The choice will determine his entry into God's Kingdom. Those who are unwilling today to wipe the tears of those who cry, would themselves cry some day and there may not be anyone to wipe their tears. The service we render to the poor is the service we render to God. This is what Jesus has taught us. It is time that we introspect and engage in an examination of conscience, as individuals and as a society.

God is not someone who is enamored by the beauty of churches or homes. Can we, therefore, expect to find God in churches, however beautiful, when we have ignored the plight of millions who live in slums and foot paths, without food and without shelter? Those who raise money for building churches, festivals and celebrations, through voluntary donations or by force, should pause and think of the poor who go without food most days. Paradoxically, huge banquets are held, by parishes and shrines, to entertain those who are already well-fed.

The Last Judgment narrative can serve as a brief summary of Jesus's teaching about social justice. The discourses, which began with the proclamation of the Kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount, concluded with the account of the Last Judgment: "*These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life*" (Mt 25, 46). Many who secretly long for wealth and luxury fail to take note of this unequivocal teaching of Jesus. If the rich share all that they have, how can there be any rich persons? If we are not willing to share what we have, how could we enter the Kingdom of God? The challenge of a camel going through the eye of the needle stares at the face of not only individuals but also institutions and their leaders, including religious institutions.

They Had Everything in Common

“The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common” (Acts 4, 32).

The Acts of the Apostles recount the teachings, activities and the nature of the early Church. They provide a fairly good idea about social justice practiced in the early Church as well. The way the disciples of Jesus accepted His teachings and put them into practice is all reported in detail. Their example is worthy of emulation.

On the day of the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles, with the force of a powerful storm, in the form of tongues of fire. Suddenly they all changed, they were no more what they were. The Holy Spirit did wonders. Fear gave way to courage. The disciples of Jesus, who had gone into hiding for fear of the Jews, came out with courage. The illiterate fishermen spoke eloquently in clear language about Christ’s message of salvation. They urged the people to believe in Christ. *“Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words” (Acts 2, 14).*

People were deeply touched by the words of Peter and their hearts were moved. They grew aware of their sinfulness, resulting in their conversion. They asked the Apostles, *“Brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the*

name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For, the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2, 37-39). About 3000 people received Baptism that day. This marked the birth of a new community, committed to the principles of social justice.

The new Christian Community grew fast in faith, spirituality and righteousness. *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers"* (Acts 2, 42). Four things are evident: First, the teaching of the Apostles was a commentary on the mysteries, revealed through Jesus Christ. There were clear instructions about what is to be believed and how faith should shape individuals and society.

The second element was Fellowship. The meaning of the original Greek word 'koinonia' used in the text is sharing or to participate. The early Christians shared everything in common. No one kept anything to himself or herself. The proclamation of the Gospel by the Apostles was also a sharing of their experiences. Everyone was moved, more so because they had already been exposed to the teachings of Jesus. In addition, they also shared the material goods they possessed. All this sharing empowered the new community to bear witness to Christ.

The third element was the Breaking of Bread. This was a service which commemorated the command of Jesus given during the Last Supper as well as His Sacrifice on the Cross. For the early Christians, breaking of bread was the center of their community life. They gathered around the Table to share the meal which turned them into a community, bound by one mind and heart. Indeed, the breaking of bread was the source of their strength and unity.

The fourth element, prayer, follows logically. The

community of believers, filled with love and conviction that they were brothers and sisters, prayed together, professing God as their Father and Jesus as their Savior. This automatically led to the growth of a strong society based on the principles of justice.

St. Luke speaks in detail about the community. *“All who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved”* (Acts 2, 44-47). This is nothing but the story of a steadily growing community based on Christian values and principles.

Nobody forced them to form a community of this nature. It was the result of the promptings from above. The inspiration was provided by the teachings of the Apostles. They already had Jesus’ own example, His preaching and life. ‘Metanoia’ or change of heart is how we refer to this transformation. When we are committed to a life of sharing, there is no feeling of loss or regret for having to renounce all that we have, but only happiness in being part of a loving community. The joy, which ensues, is a powerful testimony to the presence of Jesus. Simplicity and happiness were evident in the communion of people at the Table. Their numbers grew day by day (Acts 4, 37).

St. Luke describes the life of the Christian Community which was characterized by sharing and justice: *“The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the*

resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need" (Acts 4, 32-35).

This is the kind of community that God desired and Jesus taught. They shared everything they had with everybody else and no one was in want. The matter of common property was highlighted in the first book of Genesis. God has created the earth and its products for all the people in the world. Nobody has the right to its produce beyond what he needs. The book of Leviticus stresses this idea emphatically. *"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me"* (Lev 25, 23). This is exactly what Jesus taught, the Apostles proclaimed and the first Christian community practiced.

One of the basic issues of Social Justice is the matter of private property. There will have to be limits to what one can legitimately possess as his own. This earth and all its produce belong to God. All the creatures are entitled to live on earth and to be provided with what they need for their sustenance. Accordingly, no one can be allowed to amass unlimited wealth. The needs of others necessarily impose limits on what one can rightfully possess. Jesus has taught us this truth through the parables of "The rich man and Lazarus" and "The rich fool". Jesus has made it clear in unequivocal terms what our attitude towards wealth should be when he declared that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for the rich to enter into heaven.

No one should suffer from utter poverty. No one should be allowed to starve in the world. Rather, everyone should

have access to what is needed to live with dignity. Is it possible to create such a world? Yes, we can by sharing what we have, willingly and generously. In fact, the testimony of the Apostles and Preaching of the Gospel would be meaningful and effective only if sharing becomes central to community life. Direct experience of community life, where everything is held in common, is essential for our spiritual growth.

St. Luke has also recorded stories of people who failed to share everything fully while pretending to be doing so. The tragic event relating to Ananias and Sapphira is a case in point. The tragic story is narrated after telling generous act of *“Joseph, who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas (which means, Son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet”* (Acts 4, 36-37).

Here is the story of the couple Ananias and Sapphira: *“But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife’s knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles’ feet. “Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!” Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it”* (Acts 5,1-5). Peter questioned them about the insincerity and pronounced his judgment on them. He made it known that he regarded their action as a serious offense against the Holy Spirit. The property was theirs, the entire proceeds from the sale belonged to them.

No one forced them to sell it and give the money to the community. But what made it sinful was their hypocritical behavior, their pretense to have given all the money from the sale to the community while they had not. That is what brought them the serious punishment they suffered. First Ananias and then Sapphira died tragically.

The early Christians viewed wrongdoings in matters of sharing with extreme seriousness. The story of Ananias and Sapphira aside, there were other incidents of wrongdoings with regard to the practice of social justice. Both Jews and Gentiles believed in Christ and became members of the Church. But the Jewish Christians began to regard themselves as superior to the Gentile Christians, so much so, they felt they were entitled to certain financial privileges.

In the early days, there was hardly any discrimination in the Christian Community. Gradually, though, the malady set in. *“In these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution”* (Acts 6, 1). The Apostles regarded the neglect of the widows as a problem which deserved immediate attention. They instructed that the distribution of food should be carried out in a fair manner without causing disruption to the Proclamation of the Word. The deacons were entrusted with this task. Thus, a new line of service was initiated. However, evangelization continued to be given the highest priority. We have the examples of Stephen and Philip who were among the seven specially chosen, but they too were doing the preaching. Preaching of the Word would lead to conversion and conversion in turn, to practice of social justice.

No doubt, poverty cannot be eliminated by sharing only. In fact, when everyone sells everything he has and

shares them, the result can be poverty. Besides, if everyone is selling all his possessions, who will be left to buy them? Hence selling and sharing are not the ultimate remedies to alleviate poverty. However, the long-standing tradition of private property is prone to abuse and to acts of injustice. No one is an owner but only a care taker of the property. Whatever is entrusted to us should be shared with those in need. All that we possess should be put up in the service of others. This is the teaching contained in the Acts of the Apostles.

To develop the readiness to share our possessions with those in need, a change of heart is needed, a consciousness that wealth is neither the be-all nor the end-all of life nor the source of our security. Relying more on God's Providence will be a far better alternative. Evangelization, breaking of bread, and prayer would lead to the creation of a community, where sharing is the way of life. Those unwilling to share will have no place in this community of love. Reluctance to share has brought about discrimination, manipulation and exploitation even among Christians. The case of Ananias and Sapphira is one example among many. That St Luke considered it important enough for inclusion in his narration is noteworthy.

Table fellowship contributes to furtherance of social justice. The next topic of discussion will be St Paul's teaching on Social Justice as found in his letters.

Table Fellowship - Center of Community Life

“Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me”. In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me”. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Cor 11, 23-28).

St. Paul has warned that the Holy Eucharist which is the source of eternal life could become deadly poison, if anyone partakes of it in an unworthy manner. The various aspects of social justice are clearly explained in the Old Testament, in the teachings of Jesus and in the observations of the early Christians. St Paul has beautifully summarized them in this discourse about the Holy Eucharist (1 Cor 11, 17-34). This can be regarded as a preface to the teachings of St. Paul about Social Justice.

The church in Corinth was established by St. Paul. He spent more time in Corinth than in any other place, to preach the Gospel and to build up the church. He also took time to write letters to them to strengthen their faith. The

two epistles, written to the church in Corinth, contain a total of 29 chapters. Hints are found in these epistles that St Paul might have written one or two more letters to the church in Corinth (2 Cor 2, 4), but they appear to have been lost. Possibly a third letter too was addressed to the church in Corinth. Unlike in his other letters, in the letters to the church in Corinth, St Paul deals with the problems the church is faced with and suggests directions and, where required, even sounds warnings.

One of the serious problems that St Paul was worried about was the split among the members of the church in Corinth. The Apostle appeals to the Corinthians: *“You were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me... that there is quarreling among you, my brethren”* (1 Cor 1,9-11). After dealing with the various factors that gave rise to the dissension, he starts the discussion about the most important issue, in a negative tone.

“In the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse” (1 Cor 11, 17). He then proceeds with his instruction about the Holy Eucharist. *“In the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you meet together, it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?... Whoever, therefore, eats the*

bread or drinks the cup if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home - lest you come together to be condemned. About the other things I will give directions when I come” (1 Cor 11, 18-34).

The early Christian community in memory of the Last Supper of Jesus celebrated the Holy Eucharist, during the supper time. They gathered at home as small communities and broke the bread, recalling the command of Jesus “*Do this in memory of me*”. St. Luke, who has written the history of the early Christian community, has spoken about it (Acts 2, 46).

It was during the Last Supper Jesus had with His disciples that He instituted the Holy Eucharist. Jesus conducted the service of breaking the bread after giving his disciples a lesson in humility by washing their feet. Through the institution of the Eucharist, Jesus gave them His body and blood in the form of bread and wine. After doing it, He asked the disciples to do it in His memory (Jn 13, 1-16).

On the first day of the week, the Christians would gather in a home for the celebration of the breaking of the bread. Though they were all believers and had already been baptized, they were yet to understand the teaching of Jesus about sharing the material wealth they had. For among them there were still rich and poor.

Everyone who came for the supper brought some food to share with the group. They would place the food on a common table and each one would take what he wanted. This was an expression of their fellowship. Breaking of bread was done in memory of the love Jesus had shown by offering himself as food for all His followers. This was a way of becoming one with all those who believed in Him. The Greek word “*Koinonia*” referred to the relationship which existed or should exist among the Christian communities. Thus, the meals at supper were instrumental

in building community relationships. These meetings were called “Table fellowship” or Agape.

This was a community of Christians who professed Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. They lived adhering to His teachings and sharing everything in common. But gradually discrimination set in. The rich and the most important guests were seated in the main part of the house while the poor sat on the floor at the back.

There was also difference in the food consumed. Initially they all shared together whatever was brought but slowly small groups got created. While the rich, who had brought with them large amount of food, could eat to their satisfaction, the poor had to be content with the meager food they had brought with them. This created a division between the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor. The gathering for the Holy Eucharist, meant to unite people, turned into an occasion where seeds of disunity were sown. *“For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk”* (1 Cor 11, 21).

When St Paul came to know about it, his sense of justice erupted like a volcano. He asked, *“What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not”* (1 Cor 11, 22). It was after this severe rebuke, that he taught them how Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, its meaning and how they should participate in the celebration of *“breaking the bread”* (1 Cor 11, 23-26). He repeated the directions, the warnings and the threats several times to drive home the lessons clearly.

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11, 27). What

makes one unworthy to participate in the banquet of Jesus? *“Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself”* (1 Cor 11, 28-29).

The Apostle’s instruction is not only directed at the church in Corinth but is applicable to all the faithful. It is a call to examine our conscience to evaluate our worthiness to partake of the body and blood of Christ. What does St. Paul mean by ‘discerning the body of Christ? Everyone should recognize that the bread is the body of Christ and the wine is the blood of Jesus. But is that all the Apostle intended by this teaching?

St. Paul regards “The body of Christ” in a broader sense. The community that believed in Jesus and received the Baptism was regarded as a body. Later theologians started to refer to the community as “*The mystical body*”. Pope Pious XII issued an encyclical titled “*Mystici corporis*”, the Mystical Body. Though the body is one, it has many parts. The community of believers is the mystical body and every person is its member (1 Cor 12, 12 – 27). The Apostle dwells at length on the theme of “mystical body” in his letter. He viewed the discrimination at the Table as a serious offense. After chastising them for their improper behaviors, the Apostle proceeds to speak about the significance of community living to establish that all are members of the same body.

Those who participate in the “Agape” eat of the bread which has become the body of Christ. All are members of the mystical body of Christ. It has to be ensured that everyone has enough food to eat. The followers have to realize that any discrimination at the “Table” is a serious offence. St. Paul’s teaching that a rich person, who enjoys his banquets without any regard for the neighbor who is without

food, would receive eternal punishment, is a pointer to the source of Social Justice. This was the very same message that Jesus had conveyed through the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Our search for the teachings of St. Paul about Social Justice begins here.

Needless to say, that the teachings and the exhortations of St Paul will be relevant at all times. Faith in Jesus is the foundation of any Christian community. Those who share the same Faith become parts of a single community. They are connected with each other inseparably as in a body. Jesus Christ is the head of this community and each member is a part of this body (Eph 2, 22; 4, 15; 5, 29-30; 1 Cor 12, 27; Rom 12, 5-6). This awareness should open up several different insights about Social Justice. All the members of a community should be bonded to each other as the parts of a body. The Table fellowship provides a great opportunity to develop close bonds and to grow in unity.

St. Paul issued a strong warning to the church in Corinth about the discrimination existing in their midst against the poor. Not much is known how the warnings were received. But it may be appropriate on our part to examine whether we have allowed any discriminatory practices to creep into our own lives, be it liturgy, or celebration of feasts or other such activities.

Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist during the Last Supper. The early Christian community celebrated the “breaking of the bread” in individual homes in small groups. Over a period of time, the Mass took on a definite structure, with set prayers and special rubrics. Fixed recitals, vestments of specific colors and various other symbols became important elements of the ceremony.

Religious practices and rituals varied from place to place in the different cultures. Greater attention was paid to ceremonies. Controversies and arguments arose, questions

such as whether the Table is to be regarded as the Tomb or as the Table of last supper or the cross. Should the Mass be celebrated facing the people or should the celebrant and the people be looking in the same direction? Is the Holy Mass a sacrifice or a banquet? Sadly, the precepts of Jesus and the teachings of St Paul got drowned in the midst of these debates. Many forgot that the Holy Mass is an agape commemorating the Last Supper in small groups. Very often the Holy Mass was turned into a musical show with the choir in attendance, singing lengthy, complicated hymns to the accompaniment of several different musical instruments.

The rich became richer by exploiting the poor, and yet they celebrated the Holy Mass with the poor. Likewise, money-lenders who charge unreasonable rates of interest, persons who grow rich by selling poisonous liquor and their victims, all participate in the same Mass. Many do not see anything wrong with such anomalies and aberrations in the community. Mass is also celebrated in different ways and in different forms, and different amounts were charged as fees for the celebration, depending on the differences in accompaniments such as the choir, different rates are charged.

In short, it is time that the priest and the people returned to the Eucharistic Table. Washing of the feet should not be limited to a once-a-year ritual and then forgotten. Rather, the lesson behind the ceremony that all are equal in the eyes of God, and therefore all should be treated as equals in all matters, should be driven home strongly.

Priests should develop a humble attitude and set a good example. Those who are not willing to share whatever they have are not worthy to participate in this Holy meal. If they do so, they would invite eternal damnation. The Church community should be able to proclaim this message. This

is what St. Paul did to the church in Corinth. Those who eat the body of Christ without sharing with those in need will be consuming deadly poison. The priests and the people must keep this in mind. When everyone realizes the need to share what they have with those in need, Social Justice would become a reality. That is what St. Paul has taught us through the Table Fellowship.

Greed for Wealth - Source of Injustice

Thirteen letters are accepted by the Catholic Church as letters of St Paul and included in the Bible. At one time the letter to the Hebrews too was thought to be of St. Paul but later on, Biblical scholars changed their view. Of the thirteen letters, eight of them (Rom; 1, 2 Cor; Gal; Phil; 1,2; Thes; Phlm) were either written by Paul himself or were dictated to by him and someone else wrote them down. They are, therefore, called Proto Pauline epistles. Doubts still remain about the remaining five letters and so they are referred to as Deutero Pauline epistles. The Catholic Church, however, has no hesitation to regard all the thirteen letters as St Paul's. So, in studying St. Paul's teachings about Social Justice, same level of importance has been accorded to all the letters.

“There is great gain in godliness with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs” (1 Tim 6, 6-10).

This is a concise statement of St Paul's teaching on

Social Justice. Timothy was St Paul's beloved disciple and it is St Paul who anointed him as Bishop. In his first letter to Timothy, he spoke of all the things a Bishop should pay attention to. Just like the other churches, the churches entrusted to Timothy too were rife with squabbles and conflicts. St. Paul concluded that the most serious issues were discrimination and injustice in dealings about money matters. He thought greed for wealth was the root cause. *"The love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs"* (1 Tim 6, 10).

The Bible makes it utterly clear that the earth and all its produce were created by God for the benefit of all the creatures. To St Paul, this belief formed the very foundation of all his teachings. Everyone has to live here and to grow in maturity. This has been affirmed by God through the Covenant. Every creature has a right to live and to develop, availing of the products of the earth. The Old Testament which found fulfillment in the New Testament attaches great importance to this teaching. With this in view, we shall analyze the issue of greed for wealth.

Social Justice prescribes that everyone should get what he deserves, within the limits imposed by the needs of others. If the majority is not able to get what they deserve because a few monopolize all the wealth, it is clear that we have strayed into the realm of injustice. Excessive wealth in the hands of a few pushes many others into poverty. No wonder St. Paul has declared: *"The love of money is the root of all evils"* (1 Tim 6, 10).

The first step towards establishing justice is learning to be content with what one has. If there is food to eat, clothes to wear and a place to stay, one should be content (1 Tim 6, 8). We are not to take this injunction literally but what is conveyed is that we require very little to meet our

needs. All the creatures on earth can find enough resources in the world to meet their primary needs. If this is understood and accepted, we would develop the right attitude and the right way of life. There should be adequate legal provisions to ensure satisfaction of everyone's basic needs. There should also be laws regulating wealth accumulation. What is advocated is not imposing limits on anyone's genuine needs but promoting concern for the welfare of all.

'Secure your future', 'Seek high positions in the society', 'Exercise power over others', etc. seem to be some of the motivations behind the greed for wealth. But, no matter how much wealth a person possesses, satisfaction seems to elude him. It is not known whether any time in history so few people possessed so much wealth and yet showed so little concern for the poor in the world.

Though the rich appear powerful, free and elegant, in reality they are slaves of their wealth, alienated from God and from people, and trapped in the prisons of their own making. Seeking security in wealth is akin to relying on mirage for water in the desert. Money is often used by the rich to oppress others rather than to grow their business or to meet their personal needs. The dangers of wealth are too well-known to require much elaboration.

For Jesus, wealth is nothing but a diabolic power often used to achieve ascendancy over others. The hunger for wealth was seen as worship of idols because money demands total submission. Jesus has said, "*No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon*" (Lk 16, 13). Wealth is called "mammon" because money is adored and worshiped by many as a god (Mt 6, 24).

St. Paul has dealt with the subject of money in several of his letters. The letter to the Colossians is one such

example. He cautions the Christians about earthly evils. St. Paul writes, “*Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry*” (Col 3, 5). The Apostle goes on to say that these evils would invite God’s wrath. Greed for wealth gets mention as the last of the five evils. When many things are mentioned together, what is said first and what is stated last, are generally regarded as the most significant. Therefore, greed for wealth, mentioned last, is to be viewed as a very grave evil. That money, and not God, is worshiped is a fact of life.

The first of the “Ten Commandments” says that we must worship only God. “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me*” (Ex 20, 2-3). The injunction not to make any idols to worship should be viewed as a clarification of the First Commandment. Some scholars tend to view the injunction as a separate Commandment, in fact as the Second Commandment, possibly to accord it greater importance. However, a closer look at the Commandment, ‘you must worship the only God, and not any idols’, will reveal that both mean one and the same thing. Going further, questions may be raised as to what is idol and what is idol worship?

The Commandment itself seems to contain the answers. First of all, the Commandment defines who God is. The God of Israel is Yahweh who brought them out of slavery, from the land of Egypt. It is God who liberated them and secured freedom for them. To safeguard the freedom God gave them, they had to obey the Commandments. If they worship anything other than God, whether an ideology, or a person or a thing, they would be violating the Commandment.

What is worship? Praise, singing songs, offering in-

cense and making sacrifices are all external expressions of worship. But none of them is actually worship in itself. Worship is total surrender. It is an attitude of the heart. “You are the source of my being. All that I am and all that I have belong to You. You are my Lord. My life is in You. I find lasting joy only in You”. This is the very essence of worship and adoration.

Generally, if you worship someone or something, you tend to become a slave of that person or the thing. But this is not true in the case of God whom we worship. God does not make any of his disciples or devotees a slave but gives them full freedom. The person who worships God, the liberator, becomes liberated by that very action. No one can ever make him a slave. It is this perspective which is behind St. Paul’s teachings. The one who worships the true God will be free. God has given us freedom through Jesus Christ.

Why is idol worship forbidden? Is it because God is jealous or He stands to lose something if people worship an idol? Not at all! God does not want man, whom he created in His own image and likeness become a slave of anyone or anything. If he were to worship an idol, he would become its slave. This is the danger. Man would lose the Divine life that God has infused in him.

Greed for wealth is seen as evil, because it distances man from God and he risks eternal damnation. This is why Jesus called money idol (Mammon) and the greed for money as idol worship. What, then, is the goal of wealth and how should one use it?

What is evil is not wealth itself but greed for wealth. The earth is the greatest wealth and the common wealth of all. Everyone has both the right and the responsibility to work and to earn a livelihood. St. Paul has time and again talked about the importance of work. People should

also be willing to share the fruit of their work with others. He would regard not paying just wages as an act of injustice. Likewise, remaining lazy without working will also be reprehensible. The first letter he wrote was to the Thessalonians and this is what he says: *“To work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody”* (1 Thes 4, 11-12).

There were some people who stopped working, thinking that the second coming of Jesus would happen soon. Paul spoke to them in a harsh manner: *“You keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, we did not eat any one’s bread without paying, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing. If anyone refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with you all”* (2 Thes 3, 6-16). St Paul views laziness as a serious offense. The lazy were seen as different from the Christians. It is a basic tenet of Social Justice that we work hard and carry out our duties responsibly.

Do not steal the fruits of others' labor. Work hard so that you would earn enough, not only to take care of your own needs but also to share with others who may be in need. *"Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear"* (Eph 4, 28-29). The church in Philippi was held out as an example for sharing love, as they had given generously to those in need (Phil 4, 10-20).

The community of Christians should be caring enough to help each other. *"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.... And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith"* (Gal 6, 2-10). *"Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work"* (Tit 3, 1). This was part of the instruction Paul gave to Titus on his appointment as Bishop of Crete.

The smallest and the most personal of all the letters that St Paul wrote was the letter to Philemon. Onesimus, who was the slave of Philemon had run away to take refuge with Paul. But Paul sent him back with a letter which carries yet another lesson on Social Justice. Those who believe in Christ and have become members of the church may be slaves of Jesus who redeemed them from the slavery of sin, but otherwise they should enjoy equal freedom because they are all brothers to each other and not slaves to anybody. St Paul exhorts Philemon to accept Onesimus, not as a slave but as a brother. *"No longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord"* (Phlm 1, 16).

Fraternity is the foundation of Social Justice. Fraternity based on mutual love and acceptance would give birth to a community where people would share with each other whatever they have. All are invited to join this community of mutual love and sharing. Paul writes about this in detail in his 2nd letter to the church in Corinth.

In fact, two chapters of the letter, namely 2Cor 8-9, focus on charity and taking collections to help other Christian brethren who were in need. Paul had asked all the churches to donate generously to help the poor. He himself used to take collections to help those in need. He enlightened the people about the social and Theological aspects of Justice with examples from the Bible. He appealed to them to help the church in Jerusalem which was suffering from severe financial problems. Everyone was asked to donate what he could and the collected money would be handed over to the church in Jerusalem.

The faithful in Macedonia, themselves in the midst of a severe persecution and in intense pain, donated generously to help the other Christians who were in dire need. Paul cited their example in his letter to the church in Corinth (2 Cor 8, 1-7). People's experience while traveling through the desert should also serve as a source of inspiration (Ex 16, 16-21). God had given them Manna as daily food. Each one was asked to collect only what they needed. *"He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack"* (2 Cor 8, 15). To ensure that all were provided for adequately, those who had more were asked to share with those who had less.

"Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter, I give my advice: it is best for you now to complete what a year ago you began not only to do but to desire, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your

completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not. I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality” (2 Cor 8, 9-14). Through loving and willing sharing, there would be equality. Thus, a society, committed to justice, will be built up. Therefore, give generously, and God will provide everyone what the person needs.

“He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work.... You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God; ... Under the test of this service, you will glorify God by your obedience in acknowledging the gospel of Christ, and by the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others; while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God in you” (2 Cor 9, 6-14). The message is crystal clear. St Paul has articulated the principles of Social Justice beautifully, drawing his inspiration from the teachings of Jesus and of the Old Testament.

Paul has stressed that greed for wealth is equal to idol worship, and that guarding one’s wealth without sharing with those in need is injustice. He insists that our attitudes as Christians should be based on the principles of justice for all, whether individuals or societies. He also says that no one is to be honored for the wealth he possesses and warns

that anyone who gathers wealth in dishonest ways would attract the wrath of God and eternal punishment. Everyone has the responsibility to spread this message among all the people. Failure to do so would be a serious negligence.

Sharing is essential to make worship meaningful and to feel confident that we are living our lives in accordance with the will of God. Just as the Table fellowship contributed to community building, worship of God should inspire people to share and to be generous. It needs no mention that a person, who has sumptuous meals regularly without caring for the neighbor who is in hunger, cannot expect to be dealt with mercy by God.

God does not care about the wealth created but about the wealth shared and the love shown. Sharing is the basic purpose of all of our worship. This message is emphasized in all the Catholic Epistles, especially in the epistle of St. James. The teachings of St James on Social Justice will be our focus next.

29

Justice is Devotion

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (Jas 1, 27).

There are seven letters addressed to the universal church and they are known as Catholic Epistles. Among them the first one was written by St. James. There is some doubt about the identity of this James. Certainly, it is not James, the brother of John, who was the son of Zebedee. Some scholars think that it might be James, son of Alpheus. Most likely it is James who was known as the brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

There is enough reason to believe that this James was a very important person in the early Church. In fact, James is the first person Paul mentions as one of the pillars of the Church. *“James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be “pillars” of the Church gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship (Gal 2, 9).* It was James who pronounced the final decision in the Jerusalem Council about Evangelization among the Gentiles. *“James replied, “Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.... Therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood” (Acts 15,13-21).* According to the Jewish historian, Flavius Jo-

sephus, the author of “The Jewish Antiquity”, James was stoned to death in 62 A.D. We have highlighted his position in the early Church in order to emphasize the importance of his teachings.

The Letter consists of five chapters and 108 verses. The main theme of the Letter is Social Justice. According to St. James, faith, devotion, adoration, life after death, eternal punishment and eternal reward are all closely related to Social Justice. James argues that devotion to God cannot be limited to reciting some prayers and conducting some celebrations.

Discrimination and injustice against the poor are evils which should not have been allowed to infiltrate into the Christian Community but the worst has happened. St. James took a strong step against it, just the way Jesus and St Paul had also done earlier, as recorded in the Bible. The argument is that man is created in the image and likeness of God who protects everyone’s rights and dignity. Throughout history God is portrayed as someone totally opposed to those who oppress and exploit others. God always takes the side of the poor and the oppressed. This is apparent in the case of Cain who killed his brother Abel. This is also seen in the actions of Jesus who always stood with the poor and the downtrodden.

We must view devotion and adoration from this perspective. *“Like one who kills a son before his father’s eyes is the man who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor”* (Sir 34, 20). Here is a clear case of God taking the side of the poor. St. James has also emphasized the same thing. Devotion implies faith, humility, submission and adoration. But strangely, many who are devoted often ignore their fellow human beings. Hoping to please God, people conduct pilgrimages, celebrate feasts and build beautiful churches, but they fail to recognize the true house of God,

the people. God, who identifies Himself with the poor and seeks help for them, is neglected (Mt 25, 31-46). St. James gives an apt definition of devotion to God.

Widows and the orphans symbolize the poor as they have no one to help them. Evidence of true devotion to God is caring for the poor, protecting them and helping them while leading a virtuous life. If one is overcome with passion, he becomes, in the vision of the letter, *stained from the world*. It could be pride, greed, wealth, or position. It could be the vain desire to appear great in the eyes of the world. Such behaviors are not at all compatible with devotion to Christ. We have to wake up to the truth of our life and reflect on our attitudes and conduct. Celebrations held ostensibly for the greater glory of God often turn out to be an affront to God.

St James draws attention to the discrimination against the poor, widely prevalent among the believers. He is critical of the practice of honoring the rich and neglecting the poor. *“Show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while you say to the poor man, “Stand there”, or, “Sit at my feet” (Jas 2,1-3).*

Those who treat the rich with respect and insult the poor will do well to reflect a little. How did the rich become rich? What is their attitude towards the poor? How do they behave? St James reminds us of their typical behaviors. *“Is it not the rich who oppress you; is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme that honorable name which was invoked over you?” (Jas 2, 6-7).*

Do not show discrimination. Respect everyone while

giving special consideration and protection to the poor. Kindness is the fulfillment of law. Those who do not show mercy will receive eternal punishment (Jas 2, 7-13). Our Faith should help us to develop an attitude of fairness towards all the people, especially towards those in need. To his dismay, St. James came across many failures and shortcomings relating to matters of justice among the Christians.

The Bible teaches us that Faith is essential to attain salvation. St. Paul's teaching shows the importance of Faith, *"By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God"* (Eph 2, 8). He referred to the faith of Abraham as a model (Rom 4). *"Without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek him"* (Heb 11, 6). Again and again, St Paul emphasizes the importance of Faith. Inspired by these assertions, Martin Luther, who led the protestant Reformation, has pointed out three important things: a) A person is saved by Grace. b) Grace is received through Faith. c) Only Bible is the basis for Faith.

Even before Luther, such a view existed. Human action has no value as man is sinful from the time of his being. Hence, he can be saved only through Faith and Grace. In the early church there was a belief that the body is of no help for anything. Therefore, there is no need to care for the physical needs of the neighbor or others. St. James challenged this view and rejected it altogether.

"Judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment. What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled", without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?"

So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (Jas 2, 13-17).

Salvation is a gift of God. Everyone must attain grace through his action. Salvation will not be attained without the cooperation of man. Similarly, while conceding that one cannot be saved without Faith, it has to be stressed that Faith should lead to action. Faith finding expression in action will be salvific. Our Faith is based not only on the Bible but also on the official teachings of the Church. Accordingly, it can be said with certainty that Faith without action will save no one.

In other words, Faith without action is dead. As in the matter of devotion, Faith also has no life without action. Action means activities inspired by the love of those in need, such as the need for food and clothing. To attain salvation, one needs Faith. Faith leads one to love which inspires him to engage in actions aimed at meeting the needs of the poor. This is a clear obligation. Only Faith which is expressed in works of charity will lead to salvation. *“For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead” (Jas 2, 26).*

The slums located near the big churches should provoke us to think in a sober manner. What reply can we give if some asks: are not the crosses on top of the bell tower pointing to the graves of faith? Processions and celebrations may be a manifestation of our Faith. How do we respond if people point to the contrast between the miseries of the slums and the grandeur of our churches? Is our Faith merely a lifeless body? A serious examination of conscience is necessary.

Social Justice can be said to exist if production, distribution and use of material goods are directed at catering to the needs of all the people. Injustice comes into play the day goods end in the hands of a few and the majority are driven into poverty. St. James hurls condemnations against

those who have wronged the poor by their lust for wealth. *“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts”* (Jas 5, 1-4).

Wealth that is not shared could lead to eternal damnation. This is a serious warning, not to be taken lightly. It is a call to discharge justice. The Apostle cites a couple of examples of improper conduct, violating justice: use of expensive clothes to show one’s wealth and displaying gold and silver to advertise one’s position. Both are clear signs of pride and vanity.

“You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you” (Jas 5, 5-6).

It is not clear who is the righteous man referred to here. Some scholars are of the opinion that the reference is to Christ, who, though proven innocent, was put to death through crucifixion. But there is another possibility, if we consider the circumstances of the letter. The allusion is to the poor who are subjected to injustice. Because the wealth was not distributed justly, there were many deaths by starvation, and St. James termed them as murders. He adopted the powerful style of the Old Testament prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, and Micah (Mi 3,1-3; Am 2, 6-7; Is 5, 8-24).

St. James had very harsh things to say against those who did not pay just wages to the workers, but amassed wealth for themselves instead. He rebuked them, saying:

“You have fattened your hearts”. In those days, people would grow fattened animals for use in banquets. When the prodigal son returned, the father asked his servants to kill the fattened ox to celebrate the occasion. Animals are fattened with special food, to be served on special occasions, especially in times of great joy. St. James warns that grave punishment is awaiting the rich for exploiting the poor.

The author is also calling attention to the ways one becomes rich. Earth and hard work are the sources of wealth. Earth and its products do not belong to anyone in particular. They are the gifts of God meant for all the people. Man does not have ownership over the land but only the right to use it. The land becomes a source of wealth by hard work, by the work of human hands, by the work of laborers. Therefore, it will be a gross injustice if the laborers are not paid just wages and the money is used to amass wealth. It is a God given precept and a law of nature that just wages are to be paid to a laborer. Failing to do so would be a crime. Also, taking wages without putting in proportionate work is also a big crime, deserving of punishment. This principle is valid for all times.

St. John insists that Social Justice should be guided by love. He says, “*God is Love*” (1 Jn 4, 8. 16) and so loving is the most important Commandment. Jesus has said the same. The importance John accords to love and the way he defines it demonstrate clearly his attitude towards Social Justice. “*God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins*” (1 Jn 4, 9-10). Love is man’s response to God for the love he receives from Him. Loving God means obeying God’s Commandments, particularly the commandment to love one another (1 Jn 3, 23). “*If any one says, “I love God”, and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot*

love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also” (1 Jn 4, 20-21).

Love cannot stop with words, but it should translate into deeds. *“If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth” (1Jn 3, 17-18).* John says that a person, who could help someone in need, chooses not to do so, is guilty of a serious crime. *“Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 Jn 3, 15).*

The teachings of James and John about Social Justice are not any different from the teachings of the other books in the Bible. In fact, they resonate with greater force and clarity in their letters. The ultimate aim of any individual is to participate in the divine love which would lead to attaining eternal bliss. To be saved one needs Faith that would find expression in works of charity. Social Justice and Devotion to God are truly inseparable.

Love is the basis of all the laws. Love is the foundation of all the Commandments. But love is not just a sentiment shown but a self-less giving. God gave Himself up to us through Jesus Christ. Jesus has commanded us to do likewise. *“You love one another; even as I have loved you” (Jn 13, 34).* It is about this new Commandment of Jesus that James and John speak in their letters. Their teachings compel us to review, revise and redefine our beliefs and policies with regard to devotional practices, religious celebrations and the running of our institutions. Such an exercise alone will enable us to honor the principles of justice in our lives.

Conclusion – Eschatological Vision

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21, 1-4).

The journey in search of the teachings on Social Justice in the Bible is coming to a close. The Bible opens with a solemn proclamation, ***“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”***, and ends with the vision of a ***“New Heaven and New Earth”***. The universe that had been thrown into disarray by the sin of man would regain its original splendor through the long history of salvation. This is what is presented in the 73 books of the Bible.

Man, whose fall began with a lie, was redeemed through Truth. The author of the Book of Revelation describes the picture of this Redemption and re-establishment through numerous symbols and signs. The book of Revelation is not only the last book of the Bible but the culmination and conclusion of the message presented in the 73 books of the

Bible. The study of Social Justice too ends with the book of Revelation.

Sin had dominated the world and its history. Towards the end of the Old Testament, there seems a deep realization that the world cannot be redeemed through the efforts of man. The Prophets had called for total conversion but that did not take place. There was only one possibility left, the direct intervention of God. The world which was under the dominion of sin needed to be redeemed, reformed and made a New Creation with the original grace.

The books and parts of books of the Bible which presents the hope that God would renew this world through a miraculous intervention are usually seen as belonging to the apocalyptic literature. The following Old Testament sections are examples of the literary form called apocalyptic: Is 24-27; 35; 65, 17-25; Jer 4, 23-31; 31, 31-40; Ez 37; Dan 7-12; Joel, Amos 8; Zep; Zec 14. Likewise, many New Testament passages also use the apocalyptic literary form: Mt 24-25; Mk 13; 1 Thes 4,13-18; 1 Cor 15 are some of the examples. However, it is in the last Book of the Bible, the Book Revelation that the apocalyptic literary form as well as the eschatological message it conveys become the most evident.

All that has been said about Social Justice till now can be summarized with the help of the book of Revelation. The root cause of all the evil in the world is Satan, embodiment of the power of Evil. Though a creature of God, Satan fell into hell due to pride and turned out to be the enemy of God. Man fell into the trap laid by Satan through a web of lies and found himself enslaved. Social injustice is one the most evident manifestation of evil.

Satan who “*was a murderer from the beginning ...a liar and the father of lies*” (Jn 8, 44), deceives and enslaves people by distorting truth and presenting lie as truth. The

history of Salvation narrated in the bible shows us the path of liberation from this slavery. The Salvation history began with the call of Abraham. God revealed Himself and the plan of Salvation, step by step, to the people of Israel. The Covenant at Mount Sinai was a decisive event in the Salvation History. The precepts of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments proclaimed that justice needed to be practiced in the relationship between God and Man and in the society. Wise men and Prophets explained and interpreted the Commandments to the people.

However, humanity, weakened as it was by sin, could neither understand nor keep the Commandments. Man is in despair because he is unable to do the good he desires and ends up doing the evil he does not wish to (Rom 7, 13-25). God alone can liberate him from this situation. It was for this purpose that God became man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus laid the foundation for a society rooted in justice. He instructed the people to lead a just life. This community was called “The Kingdom of God”. However, the just society, the Kingdom of God, inaugurated by Jesus, ran into conflict with the Kingdom of Satan. The author of the Book of Revelation portrays the story as a war between good and evil, Jesus and Satan.

Apparently evil is more powerful. It is portrayed as a monster with seven heads and ten horns. He is so powerful as to gather the stars and throw them down into the earth. But, Jesus as a lamb that was slaughtered but stands up, representing sacrificial death and resurrection is meek and humble. The Church of Christ may seem weak and can be likened to a pregnant woman. The world we live in today is a dreadful place. The media has the power to present lies as truth. The global forces have weapons that can destroy the world many times over. To fight this evil, ‘the good’ appears to possess only gentle weapons such as the Word of God. The book of Revelation teaches us that the truth is

very different, that the Word of God is the most powerful weapon (Jer 5,14; 23,29; Heb 4,12).

Love is stronger than hatred. Life is more forceful than death. Truth would overcome lies. In the last analysis, it is clear that war is not between two people or between two societies but between good and evil, between God and Satan. There is little doubt that at the end God will triumph, win the war over evil. In the initial stages, those on the side of God, those who profess the Truth, will have to suffer. They must recognize the lies and the temptations and reject them outright. They must be ready to suffer and to die for the sake of justice. Those who stand for justice with Jesus will enter the Kingdom of God.

The struggle between good and evil will continue till the end of the world, and it would become more and more fierce and brutal. But, at the end, God will vanquish the evil force. The source of lies, its means of spreading falsehood, all will be wiped out from the face of the earth. That is the eschatological vision presented in the book of Revelation. There will be no more lies, no more pain, no more tears, and no more death. *“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.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” (Rev 21,1-5). “There shall no more be anything*

accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign forever and ever. And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. And behold, I am coming soon" (Rev 22, 3-7). This is the picture of the new, just society portrayed in the book of Revelation.

This is not a day-dream of the weak or the fantasy of the coward but the promise of God Almighty. There is, though, a condition to participate in this eschatological happiness. It is fidelity. Believe in Jesus Christ who is God Incarnate and follow his teachings faithfully. Become the instruments of establishing social justice by following the way Jesus has revealed, *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another"* (Jn 13, 34). Those who believe in Him and obey Him should pray constantly, *"Surely I am coming soon". Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"*- Maran Atha (Rev. 22, 20).

This is the prayer of the faithful and the prayer of the universe: *"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now"*; (Rom 8, 22). We join in this prayer with the help of the Holy Spirit: *"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, 26). The cry for justice, the thirst for equality, and the sufferings and the struggles to establish righteousness on earth will not go in vain because these desires have been planted in the hearts of the faithful by God Himself. He will be coming soon (Rev. 22,

20). God who poured the Holy Spirit into our hearts has made this promise (Rom 5, 5) and He will be faithful to His promises (2 Pt 3,13). Trusting in the promises of God, with faith and hope, let us pray and say, Maran Atha!!

COME LORD, JESUS!