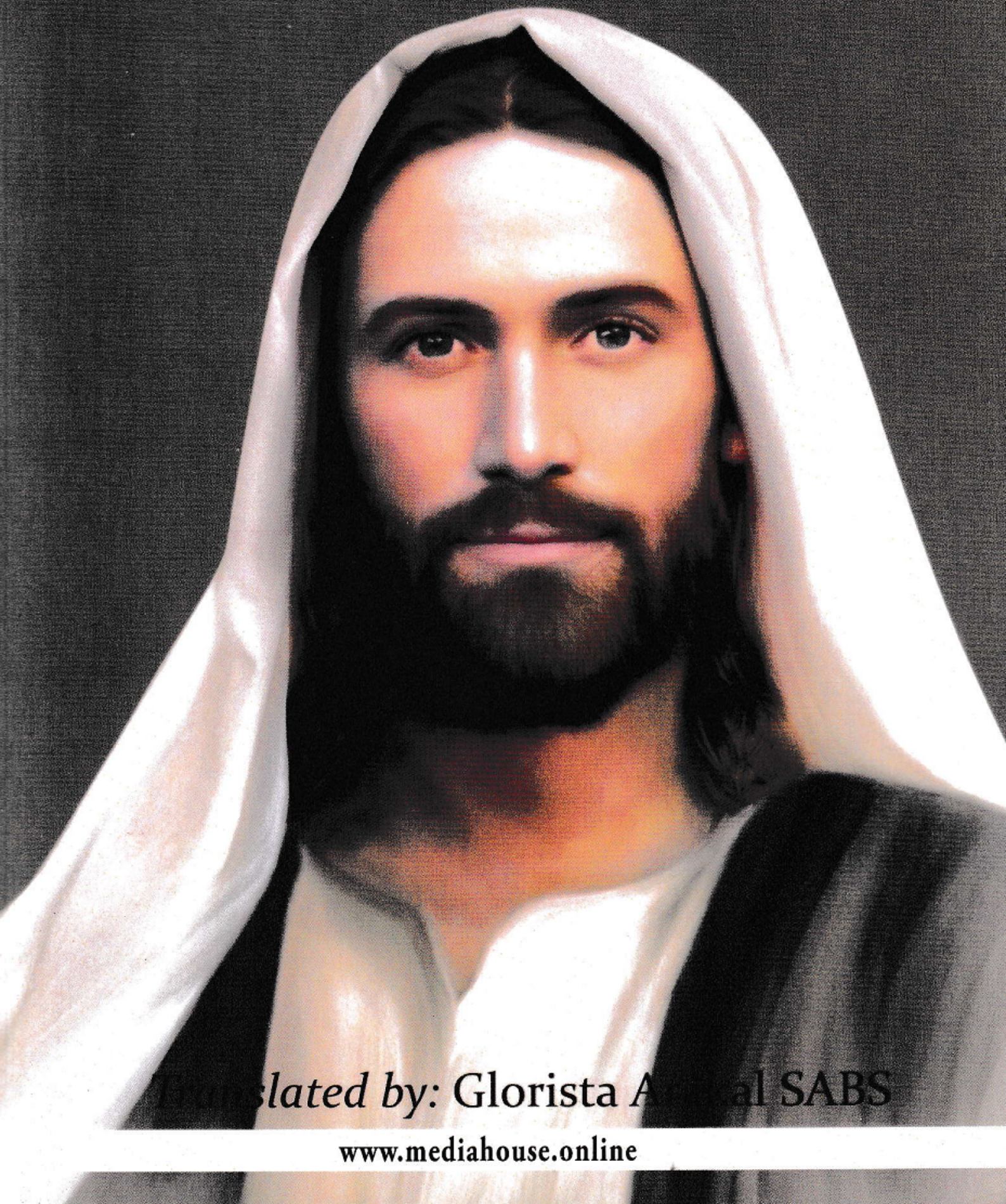


DR. MICHAEL KARIMATTAM

THE PROPHET from NAZARETH



Translated by: Glorista A. Al SABS

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Jesus asked the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And he charged them to tell no one about him" (Mk 8, 27-30). The question Jesus asked the disciples is still relevant. It ultimately leads to a soul-search and final answer to the question, "who is Jesus for me". Every person has to answer this question and the answer would ultimately shape his/her life.

This book is an attempt to respond to this question in the light of contemporary Bible research, teachings of the Church, and personal reflections, keeping in mind the present day experiences and needs. While accepting that each Evangelist had his own view of the issue, a comprehensive approach to the personality of Jesus is presented here. Prime importance is given to the theme, Jesus the Prophet because such an approach would be most helpful to depict the historical Jesus, accepting the fundamental truth that no title or concept would do complete justice to that great personality.

Starting from the most simple and generally accepted facts, the study moves into a deeper level of the personality of Jesus. This leads to a lifelong pilgrimage in search of the answer for the question, "who is Jesus for me"?



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FROM NAZARETH**

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Dr. Michael Karimattam



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By Dr. Michael Karimattam

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INTRODUCTION

“Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets.” And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” And he charged them to tell no one about him” (Mk 8, 27-30).

The question Jesus asked the disciples is still relevant. What others say about Jesus is an important issue for the disciples but it is limited to intellectual knowledge. As far as Jesus was concerned, the popular opinion was not a matter of concern for him. However, he did care what the disciples thought about him and what place he had in their hearts. The disciples were compelled to move from the level of intellect to the level of heart; from knowledge to decision. They had to decide who Jesus was for them personally and as a group. The question, “who is Jesus” ultimately leads to a soul-search and final decision to the question, “who is Jesus for me”. Every person who encounters Jesus has to respond to this question in his/her heart and by his/her life commitments.

We see different responses in the New Testament. Each of the Evangelists and the Apostles who wrote the epistles, though based on the fundamental tradition, gives his own response to the question, who Jesus is for him. Studying the person of Jesus, contemplating His personality has paved the way for different answers for the same question. Thus, the New Testament contains different elements leading to a deeper insight into the person of Jesus. Though the pictures vary, they

all present the various sides of the same personality of Jesus. Each one's emphasis is different, but they are not contradictory but complementary. The person of Jesus is a mystery and it can be viewed and presented in various ways. What decision each one takes about Jesus is the most important matter.

“Who do you say I am”? Every person has to answer this to himself/herself and the answer would ultimately shape his/her life. This book is an attempt to respond to this question in the light of contemporary Bible research, teachings of the Church, and personal reflections, keeping in mind the present day experiences and needs. While accepting that each Evangelist had his own view of the issue, a comprehensive approach to the personality of Jesus will be presented here. Prime importance will be given to the theme, Jesus the Prophet because such an approach would be most helpful to depict the historical Jesus, accepting the fundamental truth that no concept would do complete justice to that great personality.

Starting from the most simple and generally accepted facts, the study would move into a deeper level of the personality of Jesus. In this pilgrimage from surface to the depth of the person of Jesus, new views may be uncovered and it might lead to abandoning some of the old attitudes and accepting some new ideas. It might require repeated analysis of the same incidents and teachings presented in the Gospels. Some might find the repetitions boring but a deeper look at the issues would lead to new revelations. This is a lifelong pilgrimage in search of the answer for the question, “who is Jesus for me”?

1. PALESTINE – A SMOKING VOLCANO

God is beyond time and in the same way, the message of Salvation He communicates also is beyond time and space. However, God reveals himself in time and place, namely through the history of man and to understand that revelation we have to understand the situation in which the message was revealed. The Christ event happened in a particular place and time and to have at least a limited understanding of that mystery, we need to understand the historical situations of that time.

The Political Back ground:

Israel believed that they were specially chosen by God to be instrumental in manifesting the salvation plan of God designed for saving the whole humanity. It was for this purpose that God liberated Israel from the slavery in Egypt and settled them in the Promised Land. It was their deep faith and conviction that God will grant liberation for all the people and each nation will have a land of their own where they can live in freedom and peace. God created this earth, so that all may be free to live and to grow, without being enslaved by any other. However, contrary to their faith, the Jewish people were, since 557 B.C., dominated by one or another power such as Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. It was in 63 B.C. that the Roman Empire established dominion over Palestine. Herod, born to Antipas of Idumea from a Jewish woman, with the consent of Rome, became king of Palestine in 40 B.C. However, only in B.C. 37, could he establish his throne and start ruling the area he conquered. After his death

in B.C. 4, the kingdom was divided into four provinces and his sons took charge of these various provinces. Archelaus ruled the provinces of Idumea, Judea and Samaria while Galilee was taken over by Antipas. Being dissatisfied with Archelaus, Rome exiled him in A.D. 6 and began to rule those provinces directly through a Governor appointed by the Emperor. According to the direction from the Emperor, Herod Antipas ruled Galilee until A.D. 39. For all practical purposes the Palestine where Jesus lived was a Roman Colony.

More than 30% of the gross income was taken by Rome as various types of taxes such as land tax, income tax, sales tax and personal tax. In order to exact the head tax, the Romans often took census and this was a great offense for the Jews as they believed that the people of God were not to be counted. More than one Legion of the Roman army camped in Damascus, the capital of Syria, the Eastern province. A Legion had more than 6,500 Roman soldiers. Besides, there were almost as many local soldiers. The Roman Governor resided in the city of Caesarea Maritime, a city Herod built on the Mediterranean, north of Galilee and gave to Caesar. Only on special occasions did the Governor come and stay in Jerusalem, in the Fort of Antonio, which Herod had built in honor of Mark Antony. The Roman soldiers made frequent marches between Damascus and Jerusalem and their route was through the bank of Galilee, via Nazareth. The main duty of the soldiers was keeping peace and collecting taxes which they did diligently. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, hearing the marching sound of the Roman soldiers.

Economic Situation

The economic structure that existed in Palestine during the time of Jesus was conducive to foster poverty and to increase the number of the poor in the area. Most of the fertile land was converted into large estates owned by Romans and local leaders who settled in the big cities of Jerusalem, Damascus and Tiberius, after entrusting the running of the estates either to

tenants or to managers. A large number of people owned no land and they lived by fishing or working on other's property for meager wages. The ordinary people were weighed down by taxes but the rich continued to become richer by exploiting the poor and the common people. Out of their dire need, the poor usually borrowed money from the rich who charged great interest which led to losing their property and freedom and reduced them to the status of mere slaves.

With the degradation of the middle class, unemployment increased. People waited in the public places, hoping that someone would call them for work but they were often disappointed and went home, pushing the whole family into starvation. As the number of workers increased and there was no job, people were forced to work for less and less wages again making the poor, poorer and the rich, richer. Thus, when the majority of the population lived in utter poverty and misery a few lived in great luxury.

Social Situation

Based on birth, job and physical condition, people were divided into different classes. Only those who could claim to be true descendants of Abraham and Sara, those who had unadulterated pure blood, were considered as true Jews and only those "pure blooded" Jews were allowed to perform priestly ministry and other official duties of the religion. A number of laws of purity and impurity existed in Palestine and they condemned a good number of people as impure. All those who were handicapped, physically or mentally, were considered impure and so they were forbidden to enter the Synagogues and prayer houses. Lepers were restricted to remain in their colonies and were forbidden to enter the villages and towns or any public places. Based on the kind of work they did, the shepherds, cleaners of clothes, barbers, butchers etc. were considered as impure and were pushed aside from the main line of the society. Those who collected tax for Romans, though they were rich, were considered

as impure. Women had only second class status in the society. The “decent citizens” of the society never spoke to a woman in public. Another group of people considered impure were those who had mixed blood such as Samaritans and Gentiles.

The impure were also considered as sinners. According to the Jewish law and tradition, poverty and handicaps were caused by the punishment from God for the sins they or their ancestors committed. Thus, there were numerous sinners in the society. The Jews believed that contact with them would make them also impure and so they carefully avoided any contact with them. Health, wealth and long life were considered as blessing from God and so those who did not have them were considered as sinners who were rejected or cursed by God. Hence they were in a hopeless condition, rejected by society and even by God. Their misery only increased as the religious laws existing in Palestine promoted and supported these social discriminations.

Religious Conditions

The center of the Jewish religion was the Temple and Sacrifices. There was only one temple and that was the Jerusalem Temple. For all the special feasts, the Jews assembled in Jerusalem with offerings and animals to be sacrificed. Since there was only one place to offer sacrifices for these thousands of people, the priests were in great demand. There were 300 priests and 400 Levites assigned to serve in the temple each day. Only pure animals without any blemish or defects could be sacrificed in the temple. To make available such animals, there was a big animal market in the temple ground. No coins that bore the image of anyone could be deposited in the temple. Romans coins had the imprint of Caesar and so they had to be exchanged for temple coins. So, there were money changers on the temple grounds. The proceedings from these markets and exchanges went into the treasury of the High Priest.

Temple and Synagogues

The Religious practices of the Jews were centered around the Temple. The temple built by Solomon was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 582 B.C. The exiled Jews came back and rebuilt the temple in 515 B.C. From 20 B.C. to 64 A.D., Herod tried to beautify the temple. Indeed they had a beautiful Temple! The blood of the sacrificed animals could be seen around the huge brass altar; smell of the meat burning on the altar mixed with the sweet odor from the incense burning on the altar of incense filled the air in the temple.

The temple area resounded with the sound of prayers uttered by the pilgrims, official prayers of the priests, songs and praise of the Levites and the sound of horns that announced the hours of prayer. An unusual atmosphere was created in the Temple area by all these sounds and smells. Besides all these, the temple campus was filled with the cry of the animals, bargaining sounds of the merchants, tingling sounds of the silver coins, and chirping of the birds. The temple became a center of apparent contradiction. The poor, sick, handicapped and gentiles were forbidden to enter the compound. The campus was filled with merchants, the ones who came to pay for prayer and those who prayed for a pay. When the “holy” and the “high” in society found consolation in the presence of “God”, the poor and sinners stayed away from the “holy place” rejected by God and high society. Temple and Feasts provided opportunity for the rich to show off their high status. They believed that God will be pleased according to the magnitude of their offering.

Though there was only one temple, there were many houses of prayer called Synagogues. No sacrifices were conducted there but people gathered there to pray especially on the day of Sabbath (Saturday). Their prayer service usually consisted of reading the Sacred Scripture, analyzing the Word of God, sermons and prayers of praise and worship. Any man who was above 12 years of age had the right to read the Bible in the

Synagogue. It was written in Hebrew. Since common people did not know Hebrew, it was translated into the vernacular language, Aramaic. These translations were called “*Targum*”. Women were allowed to stand only outside the Synagogue and pray in silence. They were not allowed to speak in public. These Synagogues played an important role in teaching the laws and regulations and preserving and deepening the faith of the people.

Religious Leadership

Leadership in the Jewish religion consisted of three groups, namely Priests, Pharisees and Scribes or Lawyers. Only those who belonged to the tribe of Levi were allowed to become Priests. Those who were selected as Priests came to 12,000 and they were divided into twenty-five groups. Each group was assigned to serve for a week. The group and person to offer sacrifice were selected by lot. Among the priests also there were different classes. The highest among them was known as the High Priest and he was the greatest authority in the Jewish religion. Only the descendants of Zadok were appointed as High Priest. Since the time of Maccabeus, the High Priest was appointed by the Political authority. There were some who paid to buy the position of the High Priest. As a rule the High Priests always tried to please the political leaders as there was mutual benefit in this relationship.

There were 28 persons appointed as High Priests in 107 years, between the time of Herod in B.C. 37 and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Among these were Annas (A.D 7 to 15) and his son-in-law, Caiaphas (A.D. 18 to 37). Annas was a very powerful man who continued to handle the authority through his five sons and son-in-law (Caiphas) who became High Priests after him. Below the High priests were chief priests who were responsible for the various sections of the Temple and religious functions. There were five sections of chief priests:

- 1: **Sagan**: In charge of the Temple army and the main assistant to the High Priest.

- 2: **Rosh Hamismar:** In charge of the weekly temple service and there were four of them
- 3: **Rosh Beth Ab:** In charge of the daily temple service and there were 15 of them.
- 4: **Hammarkal:** There were 7 of them and they supervised the security of the temple.
- 5: **Gisbar:** They were three and they handled the financial affairs of the temple.

Below them were the ordinary priests. Even among them were differences based on where they lived. City dwellers had the opportunity to offer sacrifices and received a share from the income of sacrifices. Village residents made their living studying the law and teaching the same and also by the donations they received from the people. The difference in position marked difference in the income also. The High Priest had the highest income and he was considered as one of the wealthiest men in Palestine.

The Pharisees were a group resolved to observe the laws strictly and literally. They were called “Hasidim”, holy ones, and were set apart as such. As a mark of their holiness, they wore special garments and carefully kept distance from the so called “sinners” to avoid being polluted by them through contacts. They observed not only the written laws but also all the unwritten traditions and its variations. Many of them were rich and looked down up on the common people.

Scribes or Lawyers were the ones who studied and taught laws. Anyone who knew how to write and read could become a Lawyer. They were addressed as “Rabbi” and they taught that teachers of the laws, being givers of spiritual life, should be given even more respect than one’s own parents. Each Rabbi had his own group of disciples. There were Rabbis who taught at home and on the road, being accompanied by the disciples. They were the ones who made all the judgments regarding the laws and responded to all the questions. Some did not hesitate to

take contradicting stance to other Rabbis. They often supported their stance by quoting some famous Rabbis.

Priests, Pharisees and Scribes constituted the religious leaders of the Jews. Their representatives formed the Sanhedrin, the highest authority in Israel. The High Priest presided over it and some rich men and representatives of the people also were invited to become members of the Sanhedrin. Thus, the Jewish religion had a very powerful hierarchical structure. They commanded the respect of the people, claiming that they were always involved in divine matters and so holier than others. Bowing before them and kissing their hands were common practice in Israel.

The religious leaders charged for all that they did. For teaching, judging and consultations, they received money. The ordinary people, believing that the Priests were holier and their prayers have more power before God, paid them a good part of their meager income as a reward for offering prayers. There were also other religious taxes such as for building and maintaining the Temple, payment for the priests and health care in connection with the Synagogues. Besides, there was the offering of the first fruit. All together the people paid about 30% of their income for religious affairs. Laws and their observances had become a big burden for the people. There were laws regulating every aspect of their lives and it was practically impossible to learn what to do when and how and to observe them as expected by the leaders. Hence, the common people resigned to leading a sinful life while the “holy” lived in luxury, exploiting them.

Reactions – Protests

The people were fed up in every way. When the political and religious leaders became rich by exploiting the common people, they began to resent their fate. Slowly the resentment grew into protest and rebellion that mounted to the state of a smoking volcano which could erupt at any moment. It began on the political level.

During the time of Herod the Great, there were sporadic uprisings organized by a man called Thaddeus but the army crushed it. There was another uprising in connection with the Roman census in A.D. 6 under the leadership of Judas from Galilee. The Roman Legion marched from Damascus and suppressed the revolution. So many of the rebels were killed and others escaped into the wilderness and organized guerilla attacks. The people, dissatisfied by the rulers supported these guerilla fighters. This made it possible for them to operate from the wilderness of Judea as well as Jerusalem. Over the years, more and more people joined the rebellious group.

The expectation of the Messiah gained momentum. The people strongly believed that the Promised One will come to re-establish the Kingdom of David or God will send a prophet like Moses to save the people of God. Many came claiming to be the Eschatological prophet.

While Pontius Pilate was the Governor of Judea (26 – 36 A.D.) various rebellions took place in Palestine. A Jew who came from Egypt, settled in the wilderness, east of Jordan, claimed that the Jordan would part ways when he raises his staff and he would march through dry land to possess Jerusalem. Many, believing his words joined him but before reaching the Jordan, the Roman soldiers annihilated him and his followers. Another revolution was organized by a Samaritan with 400 followers on Mount Gerizim. He claimed that at his command, the Jerusalem walls will crumble but they were eliminated before even descending from the mountain.

A more persistent and powerful group called “Sikkari” emerged in Palestine. Their name came from the sword they wore. Owing to their zealous desire and determination, they were also called Zealots. They had a definite plan to liberate Israel from the dominion of Rome for which first they would create disturbances in various places, kill Antipas and then drive out the Romans from the land. Fed up by the oppression of

the Roman rule, many in Galilee as well as Judea supported them, publicly as well as secretly. They had gained acclamation from various groups. A number of people in the Temple army were their supporters. Whenever there was a celebration in Jerusalem, they would kill some Roman soldiers. Hiding in strategic places, they would attack the Roman army marching to Jerusalem. Often Rome responded brutally. Once they crucified 2000 men of which some were nailed to the wall as they did not have polls. Jewish historian Josephus called these liberation fighters, “Lestes” (thieves) on account of his regard for the Roman Empire.

These sporadic out breaks gained momentum by 52 A.D. The rebellion started in Galilee and slowly spread to other parts of the nation. One by one, they overtook all the cities including Jerusalem. Finally in 64 AD their goal was achieved and they celebrated their victory. But, the apparent success proved to be a total disaster for Israel.

Rome responded slowly but strongly. Vespasian and his son Titus marched into Jerusalem with a huge army in 66 A.D. They re-captured all the cities one by one. City walls were demolished, houses were destroyed and fields were burned. In 69 A.D. they laid siege to Jerusalem. Since Vespasian became Roman Emperor, Titus completed the destruction. In 70 A.D., the walls of Jerusalem were demolished and the Temple was burned to ashes and a large number of Jews were taken as prisoners.

While the destructive rebellion was in formation, another historical event was taking place through the person of Jesus. He came from Galilee, the native place of the rebellious group, Zealots. Though he was sympathetic to the cause of the zealots, he did not endorse an armed revolution. However he was part and parcel of the history of Palestine where he grew up.

2. A CARPENTER'S SON FROM NAZARETH

“Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand!” This call for conversion was heard like the roaring of a lion in the wilderness of Judea in 27 A.D. John the Baptist lived in the wilderness and proclaimed that God was about to pronounce judgment over the world. The axe is at the foot of the tree. All the trees that do not produce fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire. The message spread like a wild fire, throughout Judea and people rushed to Jordan to receive the Baptism of repentance.

Among the people who came to receive Baptism, there was a man called Jesus, son of Joseph. He was an unmarried, simple ordinary youth who made a living by working as a carpenter, and came like all the other sinners to receive Baptism. However, it marked a turning point in his life and he underwent a total change after the Baptism. Soon after receiving the Baptism, he went into the wilderness and spent 40 days in severe fasting and prayer.

Jesus who returned to Galilee began to preach the message of repentance in the Synagogues. Since his words were similar to that of John the Baptist, they thought of him as a follower of John. But, soon it became obvious that he had his own life style and manner of preaching.

The life of the Baptist imbibed the spirit of the austerity of the desert. He lived in the wilderness, away from the cities and villages, eating only wild honey and locusts. His eyes burned with the wrath of God and he preached the message of repentance and conversion with a passion that instilled fear in the hearts of the people.

The life style Jesus embraced was totally different. He participated in the banquets of the poor as well as the rich (Lk 14,1) and enjoyed delicious food and drinks (Jn 2, 1-10). He communicated love, not fear and did not run away from people or avoid the company of women (Lk 8, 1-3). Jesus expressed joy in the company of innocent little children and embraced them with tender love (Mk 9, 39). When the women known to be prostitutes approached him, weighed down by guilt feelings and broken hearted with repentance, he did not think of their past sins but the love they had at the time and received them wholeheartedly (Lk 7, 44-47). In short, Jesus was not a hermit but one who loved the company of all the people, and he loved them to the point of being called a glutton, drunkard and friend of tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners.

Jesus loved people regardless of their cast, creed or nationality. He had a generous heart in which there was room for all. His personality was such that all those who encountered him were attracted to him. His presence was in the middle of the people. He was present not only in the houses of prayer but also in the fields of the farmer, in the boat of the fishermen and in the house of the poor. He spoke to them all and shared their joys and sufferings. Yes, Jesus was a caring friend to all.

He could empathize with the farmer who was pained at the sight of weeds in the midst of wheat; he could share the joy of getting a good crop (Mt 13, 1-9); he understood the anger and disappointment a farmer experiences when the trees do not give fruit in spite of his hard work and nurturing (Lk 13, 6-9). Jesus saw the anxiety of the farmers who looked to the sky with hope but were disappointed because they had lost their crop due to lack of rain or too much rain. He was aware of clouds and hot wind and spoke to them about wheat fields and vineyards, sowing and reaping. The farmers understood his language and were able to visualize the heavenly Father as a farmer (Jn 15,1).

The Sea of Galilee was rich with fish. Seeing the hardships of fishermen who made a living by fishing and selling them, he could empathize with them because he knew their anxieties and hard work (Jn 21, 25). When he saw their nets full, he rejoiced with them but felt deep sorrow, hearing the cry of those who were perishing in the storm or sinking boats (Mt 8, 23-27; 14, 22-27). He stood in the midst of these people whose life was entangled with the sea and its fatalities as well as blessings and spoke about the love of the Father who looked after them. His words gave them hope. Comparing the Kingdom of God to a net and the people to the fish, they understood his message.

Jesus was aware of the everyday struggle of women such as the poor house wife who was mending her clothes (Mk 2,21); women who were struggling to keep the fire alive at a time when there were no safety matches (Mt 25,1-13); and the house wife who swept the entire house to find the wedding ring (Lk 15, 8-10). Jesus was aware of the pain of a Father who was awaiting the return of his son who left home searching for freedom and luxury (Lk 15, 11-24). He knew the everyday struggle of the people and their joy when the lost was found and the ones who went astray returned to the safety of the home. He used their experiences to speak about the unending mercy and love of God the Father.

Jesus did not exclude anyone from his love. He did not hesitate to have table fellowship with the rich tax collector, Zacchaeus (Lk 19 1-10) as well as the rich Pharisee, Simeon (Lk 7, 36-50). Being the son of a carpenter did not make him feel inferior to any one and he had the freedom to associate with any one and every one. He had the inner authority and freedom to walk into any situation and respond with strong emotion. Moved with pity, he responded to the broken heart of a widow who was accompanying the funeral procession of her only son. The son was restored to his mother and thus he consoled her. Seeing the tears of the sisters who encountered the death of their only brother, he was moved to tears (Jn 11, 35). He was

moved with compassion when he saw that the people had gone without food for more than a day (Mk 6, 34). Jesus was a compassionate, merciful and tender loving human being.

Jesus was not only compassionate to others' pain and misery but suffered the same in his own life. He asserted that the foxes had holes and the birds of the air had nests but he had no place to lay his head (Mt 8,20). Jesus and his disciples spent the night wherever they happened to be, at the foot of the tree, side of the street or in the boats. He became homeless with those who had no place to live. He knew the pain of going hungry for having no food (Mt 4, 2; 21, 18). He lived, eating what others provided.

He worked hard and got tired enough to fall asleep in a moving boat (Mk 4, 38). Jesus shared in the fate of the poor who had to go hungry, the outcasts who were cast out of society, and the rejected for many rejected him and he knew the pain of rejection suffered by the infirm and sick like the lepers. Jesus became furious at the cruelty of the so called holy and respected upper class people who looked down on the poor, outcasts and sick. By nature, Jesus was calm and humble but seeing the cruel attitude of those rich and elite of society, he became angry and used sharp words to reprimand them (Mk 3,5; Mt 23). All these show that he was capable of having all the positive and negative emotions like any other human being.

Thousands gathered around Jesus, just to see him and listen to him and to be touched by him. His words filled them with a feeling of bliss and peace. By his touch they were healed - the blind saw, the deaf heard, the dumb spoke, the lame walked, the lepers were cleansed, the sinners were forgiven and the devils were cast out from the possessed. In short, all those who encountered Jesus became new persons. His fame spread all through the land and many praised him but this glorious state did not last long as there were people who became suspicious of him and miss-interpreted everything he did.

For various reasons, various groups turned against Jesus. At the face of injustice, he took an unwavering stance and criticized the culprit without any qualms or worrying about the consequences. Naturally the out spoken Rabbi, for his sharp criticism of injustice, earned many enemies. Each one had his own reason to turn against him. The greedy wealthy mocked him (Lk 16,14); the rich who invited him for dinner did not even show common curtsy toward him (Lk 7, 44-45); the religious leaders viewed him with skepticism from the beginning as his words and deeds challenged the traditional religious practices (Mt 15,2); they considered his words as blasphemy (Mk 2,7) and representatives of religious leaders came from Jerusalem to Galilee to observe him and to submit reports to the higher authority (Mt 15,1). The enemies of Jesus carefully built up their cause against him.

Various accusations were made against Jesus. Some accused him for being insane (Mk 3,21); while some others spread rumors that he was a Samaritan and possessed by an evil spirit (Jn 8,48) and some claimed that he performed miracles with the aid of Satan (Lk 11, 15). The religious leaders accused him of being a friend of sinners and prostitutes, a glutton and a lover of wine.

Not being satisfied with character assassination, the leaders began to have public debate with him. They demanded an explanation for healing on the Sabbath, and for his free life style and, to their mind, arbitrary explanation of laws (Mk 2, 18-24). They questioned his authority (Mk 11, 28) and tried to trick him into saying something wrong or uttering words that could be used against him and accuse him of being a traitor (Lk 20,20). In the debates, they could not defeat Jesus and they could find nothing solid to condemn him. However, they were not willing to give up. They continued to search for ways to make him unpopular and to turn the people against him. The disciples of Jesus also became prey to their accusations. They threatened to expel them and all those who support Jesus, from the Synagogue.

Slowly, the people began to turn away from him. One by one, the cities closed their gates at his face (Mt 10, 20-24). Even John the Baptist who came to prepare the way for him doubted him (Mt 11, 1-6). His relatives tried to lock him up (Mk 3, 20). His own people rejected him (Mk 6, 1-6). Common people became afraid of speaking about him in public (Jn 7, 13). Even the leaders who favored Jesus kept silence (Jn 12, 43) or stepped aside. Herod put a price on his head. In short, the Son of the Carpenter became an unwanted figure.

The religious leaders gained strength as the people turned against him and the political authority put a price on his head and began to actively seek ways to kill him. They tried to stone him (Jn 7,1. 30; 8, 59; 10, 31). When they failed to orchestrate a popular attack on him, they decided to move officially. The highest authority of Jewish religion, the Sanhedrin, passed judgment on him without even a trial (Jn 11, 17-51).

Seeing such an organized movement against him, Jesus withdrew from the public and began to spend more time outside Palestine, in the wilderness and among the gentiles (Mt 12, 15; 14, 13; 15, 21-39; 16, 4). He decided not to appear in public in areas under the Jewish leadership (Jn 7, 1). After he was condemned to be killed, he went into hiding (Jn 10, 39; 11, 54; 12, 36). Since they did not know where Jesus was, they compelled the public to inform them where he was.

Finally the Jewish Leadership influenced and paid one of the disciples of Jesus to betray him (Mk 14, 10) and at night he was arrested from his hiding place (Mk 14, 43). In the night itself Jesus was presented before the High priest and a mock trial was conducted in the morning by the Sanhedrin (Lk 22, 66) and he was condemned to death.

Jewish leadership had the right to pass judgment for capital punishment but no authority to execute it. Hence, they handed over Jesus to the Roman governor, accusing him of political

rebellion. The ones who awaited the Messiah accused him and condemned him for being the Messiah. Pilate tried to avoid the execution by sending Jesus to Herod (Lk 23, 8-12) who returned him to Pilate without pronouncing judgment. Upon questioning, Pilate could find no crime deserving capital punishment and so he washed his hands, as a sign of denouncing his responsibility and handed over Jesus for popular trial (Mk 15, 6-15). Compelled by the religious leaders, the people shouted to crucify him.

Jesus who was arrested around mid-night was taken to be crucified before noon after five trials in various courts and a popular trial. People mocked him, challenged him to come down from the Cross. Some friends, mainly women, stayed at a distance and helplessly cried. Jesus hung on the Cross between heaven and earth, rejected by all. He cried out to the Father “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mk 15, 34) but God did not come down to save him. Crying out in a loud voice, he placed his soul in the hands of the Father, in the midst of pain, sadness and abandonment. But, there was one who confessed his faith in Jesus, “when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mk 15, 39). It was neither his friends nor the religious leaders who made the proclamation but the soldier appointed to execute the judgment to have him crucified and to see that he died on the Cross.

Why was that life so brutally destroyed within three years of starting his public ministry? All he did was love and demonstrate mercy and compassion through his words and deeds. Why did the political, social and religious leaders turn against him? There are political, historical, and theological reasons behind it but none of them are sufficient to explain such a cruel ending. To have an understanding of the Christ event, we need to look more deeply into the life and teaching of Jesus and view the whole thing in the light of Faith.

3. REVOLUTIONARY?

On a Friday in the month of April in the year 30 A.D. three crosses loomed outside the gate of the city of Jerusalem. There were three naked bodies in severe agony. On top of the cross in the middle four words were written, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”. It was written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin so that all who came to Jerusalem could read and understand why he was crucified. The Roman soldiers stood on guard under the leadership of a centurion to make sure that they died on the crosses and no one rescued them before they breathed their last.

As we have mentioned earlier, there were historical and theological reasons behind the death of Jesus. While exploring the historical reasons, various points scattered throughout the Gospels need to be gathered to get a glimpse of the situation. When they are placed together in order one can see the apparent picture of a revolutionary. Analyzing the teachings and mode of operation of Jesus would reveal two types of revolutions, political and religious. While doing so, one needs to keep in mind certain facts.

1. None of the books of the Gospels are historical books as we understand them today. They are books, written by the disciples of Jesus to depict the Christ event in the light of faith for the faithful to read and come to know the person of Jesus. However, historical events support these witnesses. It is not easy to decide which ones are the historical facts and which ones are didactic descriptions. However, there are some historical facts that no one can deny. Since this is not a historical study, only one guide line for determining

the historical facts shall be mentioned here. The Gospels were written after the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was written by the Apostles who loved, honored and believed that Jesus is God incarnate and found joy in sacrificing their lives for the very faith they professed in him. Hence, naturally they would want everyone to come to know and love Jesus. In spite of this ardent desire if they have recorded things that are not conducive to faith or devotion to Jesus, facts that are liable to misunderstanding, it was because they wanted to do justice to the historical facts.

2. There could be more than one explanation for the same thing. The views and attitudes of the author would certainly influence the presentation. This was true for the Gospels also.
3. The Evangelists have repeatedly stated that the contemporary society often misunderstood the words and deeds of Jesus. In this pilgrimage from the surface to the depth of the personality of Jesus, such explanations and contradictions should be viewed more closely. If and when one looks at the public life of Jesus from a secular point of view, one can see that he was indeed a revolutionary.

All the Gospels have recorded the script written on top of the Cross. A Jewish man had proclaimed himself king in the region that was under the rule of the Roman Emperor. It was a crime deserving capital punishment. He was marked as a dangerous revolutionary who conspired against the Emperor. Such people were given the most severe punishment to dissuade any one from daring to make such attempts again. It was a clear warning to all the Jews who had a tendency to fight for freedom. Hence the sign placed on top of the Cross on which Jesus hung was written in big letters and in many languages. In short, as far as the Romans were concerned, Jesus was a dangerous revolutionary.

The Gospels do not say anything about the crime of the two other men crucified with Jesus except that they were robbers, a translation of the Greek word, "Lestes". It was used to designate

armed people who attacked and robbed the travelers during the day. The word had one more meaning that is one who caused disturbance in the community.

The Evangelists presented Barabbas who created disturbance and murdered Roman soldiers, not as a robber but as a revolutionary who engaged in an armed fight to liberate the nation from the dominion of Rome. To introduce him as one who caused disturbance in the society, Mark used the word “Stasiastes” (15, 7), while John uses the word “Lestes” (18, 40). Both words have similar meaning. According to the Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature, the word Lestes means robber or rebel. Hence it is logical to conclude that the two people crucified on the right and left were not thieves who robbed for money but rebels who fought to free Israel from the dominion of Rome. They might have been members of the Zealots. So, all three were crucified for the same crime, revolution against the Roman Emperor.

The Roman Governor, Pilate who permitted the judgment by popular trial, asked the crowd to choose between Jesus and Barabbas, as he might have considered that both of them were guilty of similar crimes. It is historical fact that Barabbas was the leader of the organization called Zealots that was conducting armed rebellion against Rome. The reasons for the people to choose to liberate Barabbas and crucify Jesus shall be discussed later.

The trial and judgment of Jesus deserves special attention. If Pilate had condemned Jesus after a trial, it would have been because Jesus was found guilty of some serious crime. The Evangelists have taken great care to place the entire responsibility of crucifying Jesus on the religious leaders, while minimizing the part of Rome in this act. Mark (15, 10) and Mathew (27, 18) states that Pilate knew that it was out of “envy” that they forced Pilate to condemn Jesus to death. Mathew further stated that Pilate washed his hands saying that he was “innocent of this

man's blood" (27, 24) and in response the crowd shouted, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Mt 27, 25).

According to John, Pilate was forced to allow Jesus to be crucified because the people claimed, that "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend; everyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar" (Jn 19, 12). All four Evangelists asserted that Pilate condemned Jesus to death only to please the public, especially the Jewish leaders. But, there is more to it. There were enough reasons for Pilate to believe the popular accusation. Besides, it is not in congruence with the character of Pilate, taking into consideration some of the things recorded about Pilate, by the Jewish Historian, Josephus.

In consideration of the sentiments of Jewish people, the Roman soldiers were told not to bring to Jerusalem the flags that bore the images of the Roman Eagle, Emperor and other symbols. But, when Pilate became Governor, he ordered them to be brought to Jerusalem at night. Thousands of Jews arrived at the Palace of the Governor in Caesarea, to express their protest and to request him to remove them from Jerusalem. Pilate responded with an order to kill them all but withdrew the command at the last moment. Not because he was afraid but because he was impressed with the courage and faith of this unarmed Jewish people. (Josephus, Antiquities XVIII-III-I; Jewish War II-IX 2-3).

Another incident recorded by Josephus is that Pilate decided to build an Aqueduct to bring water to Jerusalem. The fund for the same was found from the temple treasury called "*Qurban*". Thousands of Jews gathered in Jerusalem to protest against this move. Pilate sent the army to suppress the uprising and a large number of Jews were brutally murdered. (Antiquities XVIII-IV-I). The Roman Senate transferred Pilate from Palestine and punished him because of the mass murder he committed against the Jews and Samaritans. (Antiquities XVIII-IV-2). Based on these facts, it is not natural for Pilate to fear the popular fury.

But, he was convinced that Jesus deserved to be crucified, based on the accusation they brought against him.

Apparently what compelled Pilate to condemn Jesus was the accusation the crowd made that he will not be the friend of Caesar if he frees Jesus because anyone who makes himself king is an enemy of Caesar (Jn 19,12). This was the main accusation against Jesus and surprisingly, Jesus did not deny the accusation. Though Jesus tried to explain that the nature of his kingdom is different, Pilate did not understand it and as far as Pilate was concerned, any kind of a king is an enemy of Rome and so he was a revolutionary.

The Gospel of St. Luke recorded another accusation. The people 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 a king” (Lk 23,2). Though Pilate stated that he could find no crime in Jesus, he could not ignore implications of the above accusations. Besides Jews continued to bring accusations one after another, “He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place”. Mentioning Galilee paved the way to send Jesus to Herod but Pilate took note that he was stirring people. In a way it was true that Jesus had preached the Good News from Galilee to Jerusalem and large crowds had gathered wherever Jesus went, to listen to his teaching, to be healed and to be restored to their human dignity.

To designate disturbance, they had used the Greek word “*Anaseio*” which meant create revolt, engage in terrorist activities and encourage people to do so. In short, they presented Jesus as a leader of a terrorist group. The accusations against Jesus also included conspiring against the Roman Emperor by proclaiming himself king; doing the ground work for a revolution and refusing to pay taxes. Though Pilate could not find any solid evidences for these accusations, Jesus did not deny them or present any explanations. What do the Gospels say about these

accusations? Again a look into the scattered information in the Gospels and some hidden agenda of the leaders need to be taken into consideration.

Jesus was arrested late at night. Since they did not know where Jesus was, they needed the help of a traitor, Judas. ‘Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place; for Jesus often met there with his disciples’ (Jn 18, 2). The description about the way they came and the kind of people involved also deserves special attention. According to St. Luke, “while he was still speaking, there came a crowd, and the man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He drew near to Jesus to kiss him” (Lk 22, 47). Mark and Mathew described the crowd, “a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders” (Mk 14, 3); “a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people” (Mt 26, 47). While the Synoptic Gospels recorded only about the temple guards John stated that there were also Roman soldiers. “So Judas, procuring a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons” (Jn 18, 3). There are disputes about the meaning of the Greek word used “Speira” to designate the word “soldiers”. Some scholars claim that it was “cohort” to show that there were 600 soldiers while others claim that it was “maniple” to show that there were 200 soldiers. Under the Centurion there were 100 soldiers. A group of such 60 centurions makes a Legion.

Some of the episodes depicted in John are different from that of in the Synoptic Gospels. In such cases, it is generally agreed that, John’s presentation is historically more accurate than the other Gospels. Hence, the conclusion is that the Jewish leadership who used Judas as a traitor sought the help of the Roman soldiers in arresting Jesus. The Jewish leaders together with the temple guards and a huge number of Roman soldiers went at night to arrest Jesus. They all were armed. Jesus was surprised to see such a great mass approaching him and so said,

“Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me?” (Mk 14, 48; Mt. 26,55; Lk 22,52).

To designate “robber”, the word used was “Lestes” which meant revolutionary. All these show that the Jewish leadership saw Jesus as a dangerous revolutionary. Before the arrest, there was a struggle. According to Synoptic Gospels, a disciple and according to John, Peter, took the sword and started to fight. It shows that the disciples had weapons with them and in a way justifies the presence of the armed soldiers.

This points out to a still disputed statement of Jesus. “And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one. For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was reckoned with transgressors’; for what is written about me has its fulfillment” (Lk 22, 36-37). The response of the disciple, “Look, Lord, here are two swords” (Lk 22, 38), shows that the disciples did not understand what Jesus meant. Jesus’ words, “It is enough” have double meaning. It could mean that “two swords are enough” or “do not speak anymore as you have spoken enough”. The general conclusion is that the words of Jesus were misunderstood. However, the disciples thought that Jesus meant that they must have swords. Another statement thus misinterpreted is: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt 10, 34).

St. Luke has recorded that one of the disciples of Jesus, Simeon (6, 15) was a Zealot. The fact that Simeon Peter used the sword in Gethsemane could show that he was associated with the Zealots. His futile attempt to save Jesus might have been noticed by many and later might have caused him to deny Jesus out of fear (Jn 18,26). Another member of the Zealots among the disciples was Judas Iscariot. There is a dispute among the scholars about the meaning of the word Iscariot. John presents Judas as the son of Simon Iscariot. But some of the manuscripts refer to him as the son of Simon from *Kerioth*. There was a village named Kerioth Hebron, about 20 Km south of Hebron and

therefore it is argued that Judas was from the village of Kerioth. But it would remain a mystery how a person from the south of Judea became an apostle when all the others are from Northern Galilee. However, there are sufficient reasons to conclude that Iscariot denotes some particular characteristics of the person rather than the place of his origin. The Aramaic word “*iscariot*” came from the Greek word “*Sikarios*” which means one who wears a special kind of a sword or a dagger. In fact the name could mean dagger man or assassin. This was an attribute given to the zealots who always carried that special kind of a dagger. Judas hoped that Jesus would take up the leadership of Zealots but all his attempts to persuade Jesus for this task failed. He might have betrayed Jesus to force him to go before the Sanhedrin, to pave the way to fulfill his dream.

Two other disciples, namely James and John, whom Jesus called *Boanerges* deserve special attention. The expression *Boanerges* is translated as *sons of thunder* (Mk 3, 17). But what does this qualification actually mean? The word *Boanerges* comes from a Galilean dialectal corruption of Hebrew *benereghesh* “sons of rage” (interpreted in Greek as sons of thunder), from *Bene*= sons + *Reghesh* = commotion, tumult, throng. This was figuratively applied to Zealots or loud preachers. Some commentators interpret *Boanerges* as ambitious or zealous. Two incidents can be cited as examples to show that the name depicted their character. When the Samaritans blocked the way John and James became furious and asked, “Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?” (Lk 9, 54). The request for high positions (Mt 20, 20-23) demonstrates their ambition. Sudden burst of anger and ambition for high positions were characteristics of the Zealots. Thus a good number of the disciples of Jesus were either Zealots or supported their ideals. Jesus did not forbid his disciples to carry weapons.

Another misunderstood incident in the life of Jesus was his royal entry into Jerusalem. As directed by Jesus, the disciples

brought an ass “and put their garments on them, and he sat thereon. Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (Mt 21, 7-9). After the miraculous multiplication of bread in the desert, the people of Galilee had tried to force Jesus to become king and the disciples might have supported the idea. Hence, Jesus forced the disciples to go away and then dispersed the crowd (Mk 6, 4). For the people the miraculous multiplication was very significant as it reminded them the Exodus event. The people who expected a liberator like Moses to free them from the dominion of Rome were filled with hope and wanted Jesus to be their King. But, “Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (Jn 6, 15).

It was the people who had seen the miracles Jesus performed, that shouted with tumult of joy and spreading olive branches and carpets on the ground, accompanied Jesus in the royal entry into Jerusalem. Since the Babylonian captivity, the throne of David was empty. This royal entry reflected the hope of the people that Jesus would occupy that throne. Jesus’ teachings about the Kingdom of God, though it was different from the popular expectation, paved the way for this hope and they received him singing Alleluia and Hosanna. When they shouted, “Jesus son of David” they saw their long awaited king in Jesus. It was a peaceful, symbolic procession. As is the symbol of humility and peace. But the Romans were not aware of the symbolic value of this entry or what the prophet (Zec 9, 8-17) had said about the one who comes on the ass. As far as Rome was concerned, it was a totally revolutionary act. Fearing the reaction of the Romans, the Pharisees asked Jesus to silence his followers (Lk 19, 39). But the people received him like a king

who won the war and liberated the nation. The victorious king comes on the ass. Olive branches and green carpets were the symbols of royal reception (1 Mc 13, 51; Jn 12, 13).

Refusing to pay tax was a serious accusation and there is some reality in it. All three Synoptic Gospels have recorded it (Mt 22, 15-22; Mk 12, 13-17; Lk 20, 20-26). When the religious leaders tried to get a word from him that could be used against him and to hand him over to the Romans (Lk 20, 20), the response Jesus gave was a little vague. While he said “to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar”, he instructed to give to God what belongs to God. After giving to God what belongs to God, will there be anything left for Caesar? If the world and all that is in the world belongs to God, what does Caesar have? It was not the response of one who had undivided loyalty to Rome. In fact the ones who asked the question were forced to make their own response. If he was really loyal to Rome, he would have answered that it was lawful to give tax to Rome. By acclaiming the ultimate authority of God, he was denouncing the supreme authority of Caesar. In that respect, Jesus was a revolutionary.

St. Luke has recorded (13, 30-33) one more incident that depicts the revolutionary attitude of Jesus toward kingship. Herod who had decapitated John the Baptist decided to kill Jesus also. “Some Pharisees came, and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you. And he 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” (Lk 13, 30-32). The fame of Jesus had spread all over Galilee. As the disciples joined in his activities, it became a powerful movement (Mk 6, 14) and that might have become a threat to Herod and so he decided to do away with him. Jesus gave no value to the threat and his response revealed that he did not respect the low attitude of the king. Jesus further expressed his protest to Herod by refusing to speak to him during the trial. Neither did Jesus bend his head at the authority of Caesar or

Pilate. He did not try to explain himself or justify his activities. By saying that they would have no authority over him if it was not given to them from above, he showed the limitation of their authority. All these might have appeared as revolutionary in the eyes of the authority.

Many including his disciples saw Jesus as a revolutionary. His words and deeds might have given them such an impression. The political authority, Herod and Pilate, saw him as a dangerous revolutionary who precipitated revolt against the king and the Emperor. Was Jesus really a revolutionary or did others see him so, because they misinterpreted his words and actions? He had Zealots among his disciples but did he embrace their ideas and style of operation? Before responding to these questions a closer look at the revolutionary changes he caused in the religious sphere, is in order.

4. RELIGIOUS REVOLUTION

According to Roman law, Jesus was condemned to die on the cross for causing political unrest and revolution. But, all the Evangelists emphasized that the main force that operated behind the judgment was the Jewish leadership. Even before arresting Jesus, they had decided that Jesus must die. It was after the judgment that they sought ways to arrest (Jn 11, 39, 42) Jesus. The trial before the Sanhedrin in the presence of the High Priest Caiphas and Annas, was only a show to validate their judgment and to claim that it was legally done. “Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death” (Mk 14, 63-64). Thus their early decision was re-confirmed.

Soon after Jesus started his public life, the Jewish leaders began to view him with suspicion. As his life moved forward, their opposition and hatred gained force. Towards the end they hated him with a passion that they united all their forces to make sure that he was eliminated. What was the reason for this? Just as in the political arena, here also various facts contributed to their hostility. The Evangelists have recorded the encounters Jesus had with the Jewish leadership for various reasons. The life style of Jesus, his activities, his attitude towards religion and religious laws and the way he dealt with the religious authority, were the obvious reasons for the hostility and opposition. While accepting the fact that the Sanhedrin pronounced the judgment on theological grounds, there is still need to take a closer look at the reasons that forced the Jewish leaders to turn against Jesus.

Laws and Traditions

Jewish law controlled every aspect of human life. Besides the written law, there were various unwritten laws, traditions and explanations of the laws. Letter of the law was the order of the day. The Pharisees dedicated their lives to study, explain and to observe the laws. It was practically impossible for the common people to study or observe all those laws and so they were condemned to live as sinners and lesser beings. In such a rigid society, Jesus accepted a free stand and he expressed this freedom and independence in all areas of life.

Perfect observance of the Sabbath was the most sacred religious practice for the Jews. Remembering the freedom from the slavery in Egypt, all were instructed to take rest on the Sabbath (Dt. 5, 12-15). It was a law meant to give rest to those who work and freedom to the enslaved. But, this humanitarian law, through the explanations and analysis of the experts, became a rigid practice and a burden for the people. In order to restore the humanitarian aspect of this law, Jesus claimed that Sabbath was for doing good, for showing God's love and mercy and he engaged in healing the sick on Sabbath. Though the healing was done by a mere word, the Jewish leadership saw it as a job and protested against Jesus and accused him of breaking the Sabbath law.

The Pharisees did not care what happened to the person but they only cared for the letter of the law. Jesus challenged such an inhuman stand. "One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" (Mk 2, 23-24). Jesus asserted that giving food to the hungry is more important than observing the law. To support his stance, he quoted what David did, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, when Abiathar was

high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him? And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk 2, 25-27). In the same way Jesus justified healing the sick on the Sabbath. The Jewish leadership looked upon all these as an attack on the sacred laws and precious traditions.

There were definite Jewish religious laws about the food that were allowed or forbidden to eat (Lv 11, 1-42) and the ritual purification before eating. People who are dying with hunger might not care about these laws and would eat anything they get. This was against the Jewish law. But, Jesus took a different stand about these laws saying “Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on?” Thus he declared all foods clean”. (Mk 7, 18-19) By keeping distance from the unclean people, the handicapped, lepers, tax collectors, gentiles, Samaritans etc. the Jewish leaders protected their purity. But, Jesus freely mingled with them and they became his intimate friends and supporters. He did not hesitate to touch the eyes of the blind, ears of the deaf, and the body of the lepers. He accepted the invitation to dine with the tax collectors. Thus, Jesus became unclean but asserted that the real purity and impurity are in the heart, not in the external things. Jesus very clearly and systematically challenged several traditional religious observations! They felt that it was their sacred duty to prevent him from destroying what they had so carefully built up.

Sacrifice and Prayer

There were clear laws about sacrifice and prayer in the Jewish religion. Sacrifices were instituted to acknowledge the supreme authority of the almighty God and to offer Him thanks. Eventually they degraded into a profit making business. All knew that God did not need or get anything

from the prayers and sacrifices and He had no use of the gifts sacrificed. But, the priests who used to make a lot of money from these sacrifices encouraged and made laws to increase their profits. Jesus severely criticized such profanities and unveiled the hypocrisy of the religious leaders asserting, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (Mt 9, 13). Though it is true that Jesus had told the leper who was cured, to show himself to the priest to get the certificate (Mk 1, 14), it is evident he did not take a favorable stand to the sacrifices. According to the Gospels, Jesus never offered any sacrifices or make donations to the temple. He made only one sacrifice and that was His own sacrifice on Calvary, and that was outside the Temple and the city. With that ended the relevance of all the other sacrifices.

In the case of prayer also, the stand Jesus took was different from the official religion. He detested praying to invite the attention of the public. The Jewish leaders used to pray in public places to be seen by others and to expose their holiness. They also used to pray for a pay. People, thinking that the prayers of the priests will be more acceptable to God, used to give them huge amounts as reward. Jesus saw this as exploitation of the poor and reacted strongly. He denounced the practice of the scribes and Pharisees: “Who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers” (Mk 12, 40). Jesus introduced new standards and styles for prayer.

Jesus went to the Synagogues and houses of prayer but the Evangelists do not record that he ever prayed in these official places. He taught there and performed miracles of healing. To pray Jesus went to the wilderness (Mk 1, 35) and top of the mountains (Lk 6, 12), away from the public places. Jesus sought the presence of God in solitude. Prayer is not bargaining with God neither is it a public exercise to draw attention. This new and independent approach negatively affected the income of those who used to pray for a pay.

Assault

Jesus not only maintained a personal approach to faith and religious tradition, but also severely criticized the conservatives who kept a tight control over these matters. He unmasked the crimes, injustice, exploitation and hypocrisy of the religious leaders. He did this, using parables, arguments, proverbs, curses, lamentations, sayings and discussions.

The parable of the Pharisee and Tax collector (Lk 18, 9-14), while emphasizing the true spirit of prayer, unveils the pride of the Pharisee and emptiness of his words. The repenting sinners are far, far better than the so called “holy” people who think that they need no conversion. While talking to the religious leaders, Jesus asserted in no uncertain terms: “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots will go into the kingdom of God before you” (Mt 21, 31).

The Son who promised to do what his Father had asked for but failed to do so (Mt 21,26); and the elder brother who considered himself a slave in one’s home and refused to enter the house with the younger brother (Lk 15, 25-32) are depicted as the representatives of the Jewish leaders. The warning (Lk 13, 26-30) that those who consider themselves the heirs of the Kingdom of God, will not enter it was shocking to them. Another backlash to the Pharisees who had considered themselves specially privileged was the statements that none of those who were invited first, will taste the banquet in the Kingdom (Lk 14, 24). The vineyard taken from the unfaithful tenants and given to new tenants (Lk20, 9-16; Mt 21, 41) in a way pronounced the final judgment on the Jewish leaders. It was in preparation for the new Kingdom that the twelve apostles were elected.

It was as the climax of his confrontation with the Jewish leadership, that Jesus pronounced the seven curses (Mt 23, 13-38). The leaders are closing the door of the Kingdom of heaven

at the face of the common people. Those who attend to the letter of the law are concentrating on external purity, neglecting the essential elements such as kindness, mercy and fidelity and are filled with greed and wickedness. They build monuments for the prophets after stoning them to death and in fact they are the executioners of the prophets. Jesus made very serious and severe accusations on the religious leaders and used rather derogative words as their attributes. He called them hypocrites, blind guides (Mt 23, 24), whitewashed tombs (Mt. 23, 27) serpents, brood of vipers (Mt. 23, 33), sons of Satan (Jn 8, 44) etc. Using such severe languages against the leaders of one's religious community is certainly part of a revolutionary action.

Cleansing the Temple

The cleansing of the temple was an action that demonstrated all the protest against the degraded religious set up. Here, Jesus' protest overflows beyond words into action. "Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me" (Jn 2, 13-17). Only pure animals could be sacrificed in the temple. Only the coins without the imprint of Caesar's head could be deposited in the Temple treasury. To make it convenient for the pilgrims, these were made available in the Temple ground itself. Was this not normal and practical? But, Jesus saw them as profit making business and so robbery. Added to this condemnation, he also predicted the destruction of the Holy Temple, "This Temple will be destroyed in a way that no stone will remain on top of another stone" (Mk 13, 1).

Centralized worship was part of the power structures of Israel. Having only one Temple where sacrifices were made, Jerusalem became the religious capital of the Jews. While the Jews went to Jerusalem, the Samaritans went to Grasm to offer worship but Jesus exhorted that the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and Truth. In other words there is no need to go to the synagogues and temples to pray. This was a death sentence to the centralized worshiping system and a challenge to all the religious structures which could open the door for abuse. Indeed it was a revolutionary idea.

How did Jewish leadership respond to the one who broke the God given laws of Israel, insulted the elders and challenged the running of the temple by driving away the merchants from the temple compound? A look at the way they responded and the motivating forces behind it would help to better understand the revolution Jesus executed. In the beginning they were skeptical of him. Lawyers, scribes and elders of the Jewish religion, came to Galilee and carefully observed his words and deeds. They expressed their protest when he broke laws and neglected religious traditions; questioned him in the name of the official religious hierarchy and eventually paved the way for his death. According to the Evangelists, the religious leaders moved against Jesus on the basis of historical and theological grounds. The theological issues are intertwined with the personal identity of Jesus

The historical reason seems to be mainly caused by the jealousy of the religious leaders. According to the Evangelist, Pilate wanted to free Jesus “For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up” (Mk 15, 10). The reason for the envy was that Jesus had become very popular. “So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation” (Jn 11, 47-48). They became insecure thinking of the consequences of being

rejected by the people. If there was no one to praise them and honor them, they will have no value and their power will become useless. This shows that the revolutionary ideas and freedom Jesus advocated had greatly influenced the people and they had started to turn against the elders. If the process continued, the very structure of the Jewish religion will be shattered.

What is the co-relation between all the people following Jesus and Romans coming to destroy the holy place and the nation? It alludes to the fact that the teachings and actions of Jesus did not go along well with the Roman authority. The High Priest and the elders knew that their existence depended on being submissive to the Roman authority. Jesus was a threat to the religious leaders who cared only for their own security and rights. His independent stand was a threat to all those who accepted the supreme authority of Caesar and remained subservient to the Roman Empire. Taking all these into consideration, the short sighted religious leaders decided that it would be better that Jesus was eliminated, for the security of their own positions and the safety of the Temple and their religion.

The Jewish leaders failed to keep the people in control with their threats and punishments. They confessed their helplessness and envy in the popularity of Jesus. “The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see that you can do nothing; look, the world has gone after him” (Jn 12, 19). There was only one option left before them and that was to kill Jesus by all means. Since they could not accept the Truth, they decided to eliminate the one who revealed the Truth.

All these were the theological reasons, on the human level, that paved the way for the death of Jesus. However, these are only the rays of the revolutionary torch Jesus lighted. To find the real source of the revolution, a deeper search is needed. A search into the way Jesus perceived God the Father and the relationship between God and man. What Jesus thought of authority and the use of authority is another matter that needs to be considered. Above all, the revelation Jesus provided about

his own personality and his divine mission would shed some light on the power of the revolution Jesus executed.

The revolution Jesus started was not limited to some religious practices, traditions and structures. The revelation of his personal identity, as the Son of God, shook the very foundation of the Jewish faith, namely, faith in One God. Whether the revelation Jesus made was true or false was a serious question. The Jewish leaders could not dare to look into it? This simple carpenter from Nazareth, without any formal education or training under any famous Rabbis, freely explained the laws and made decisions and judgments that turned over the sacred laws and traditions given by the great prophet Moses.

Jesus taught with authority and gave new meaning to the laws by his teachings with the introduction, “You have heard that it was said... But I say to you... I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny” (Mt 5, 21-26). Jesus not only broke the sacred law of Sabbath but claimed to be the master of even the Sabbath (Mk 2, 23-28; 3, 1-6; Lk 13, 10-17). He claimed to be greater than Solomon the wisest man who ever lived and the Prophet Jonah (Mt 12, 38-42). Jesus challenged them saying that he could re-build the temple in three days (Jn 2, 19; Mt 26, 61). The Jews who maintained their faith in one God could neither understand nor accept such words spoken by Jesus.

Going one step further, Jesus used the very authority of God. The Jews believed that only God could forgive sins. But, Jesus claimed the authority to forgive sins and demonstrated the same in public (Mk 2, 5; Lk 17, 48). A word from him was enough to enable the paralytic to get up and walk. He also gave his disciples permission and authority to forgive sins (Mt 16, 19-20).

Because of their great reverence and fear of the Almighty God, the Jews addressed God as Yahweh. Most of the time they did not even dare to pronounce His name but used the adjective such as “the most high”, “almighty” etc. In such a society Jesus claimed

equality with God and addressed God in the most endearing term, “Abba” (Father, Daddy etc.) that was unthinkable for the Jewish leaders. More than that Jesus claimed that he and the Father are one (Jn 10, 30); the one who sees him sees the Father (Jn 14, 18); before Abraham was, he was (Jn 8, 58). In reality this was the source and essence of the religious revolution Jesus enkindled.

In the film, Jesus of Nazareth, Franco Zeffirelli has depicted a discussion among the members of the Sanhedrin, regarding the identity of Jesus. The main problem, the High Priest argues, is not whether Jesus has performed miracles as or he has disobeyed. Of course, obedience to the law is important laws, but the heart of the problem is not his obedience, but his claims about his identity. Who is this Jesus? It is reported he claims to be the Son of God, having the power and authority of God. Does it mean that there are two Gods? That is the real question. Finally the High Priest, Caiaphas, asked Jesus the decisive question: “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his robes, and said, “He has uttered blasphemy” (Mt 26, 63-64). The highest authority of the Jewish religion, the Sanhedrin, condemned Jesus to death.

The issue was the root of Jewish faith, faith in One God. This fundamental issue was challenged by Jesus. They could not compromise the root of their faith to the revelation of Jesus. They could not understand the concept of Trinity. The mystery of Triune God was beyond their comprehension. Hence they perceived the word and deed of Jesus as utter blasphemy. Jesus advocated a new way of life, a new relationship with God, a new religion that affected every aspect of human life. It was from this reference point that Jesus demanded a renewed attitude toward political, social and religious life of the people.

5. A REVOLUTION MISUNDERSTOOD

Regarding Jesus, there are many things in the Gospels that do not suit the life of a revolutionary. A close look at them would show that they were not made up by the Evangelists to make Jesus look good but true historical facts.

All four Gospels record that Jesus was subjected to a trial by people. Why did the people request to have Jesus killed and Barabbas liberated? Obviously Barabbas was not only a member of the Zealots but also the leader of the movement to liberate Israel from the hands of the Roman Empire. So, he was the representative of all those who desired liberation. For the freedom hungry people, the life of Barabbas was more useful than that of Jesus. The Zealots who desired to free Barabbas and the Jewish leaders who desired to eliminate Jesus joined force to influence the people to choose the freedom of Barabbas and the execution of Jesus. In short, Jesus was not a revolutionary like Barabbas.

Barabbas was a man who created disturbance in the city and killed Roman soldiers. There were no such accusations against Jesus. Jesus never initiated or supported any disturbance. Neither did Jesus or his disciples take part in killing anyone. In no way had Jesus supported any violence against anyone. There was a confrontation in Gethsemane and Peter used his sword but Jesus stopped it at once saying, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Mt 26, 52).

A previous statement of Jesus instructed, “Let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one” (Lk 22, 36). The disciples

took it literally and even many considered it as meaning to buy a sword to use for fighting. But the next sentence shows that Jesus used those words in another meaning. The disciples said, “Look, Lord, here are two swords.” And he said to them, “It is enough” (Lk 22, 38). This happened the night before Jesus was crucified. Jesus knew that he would be betrayed and the political and religious leaders were preparing to move against him. It is difficult to conclude that Jesus was instructing the disciples to buy arms to fight against his enemies. Jesus had said “it is enough” when they had said that they had two swords. Jesus, who was aware of everything, knew that such a small group with two swords can do nothing to protect him against a great army that was coming to arrest him. Jesus used those words with a totally different meaning. To understand the inner meaning of those words, the circumstances under which those words were uttered need to be considered.

Jesus said those words as part of his farewell discourse, during the Passover meal, his last supper with his beloved disciples. After establishing the new covenant of love to be sealed with his own blood, Jesus reminded the disciples that he was about to die (Lk 22, 14-23) and repeated again, that others should know them as his disciples because of their love and readiness to serve everyone in need (Lk 22, 24-30). He told them that their attitude towards authority should be different from that of the pagans; that authority is to serve not to be served. Jesus will be taken away from them and it will be moments of crisis for them, crisis that could lead to the loss of faith. Even the leader of the group, Peter would deny him but Jesus prayed to strengthen them. “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren” (Lk 22, 31-32). All these were only the beginning of a big crisis for the disciples and the followers of Jesus.

While Jesus was with them, the disciples had total protection but that would not continue after his departure. Jesus was preparing them for the future, reminding them of their past experiences. And he said to them, “When I sent you out with no purse or bag or sandals, did you lack anything?” They said, “Nothing” (Lk 22, 35). Jesus was referring to the Galilean ministry (Lk 9, 1-6; 10,1-12). The disciples rejoiced that even the evil spirits obeyed them. Before going on the mission Jesus told them, “Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you” (Lk 10, 19). Jesus had given them power over all the enemies. By enemy, Jesus meant Satan because it is the evil force that stands against the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus had defeated Satan in the beginning of his public life. At the end, “when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time” (Lk 4, 13). The opportune time came at the beginning of the passion and suffering of Jesus and Satan returned to his work. “Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot” (Lk 22, 3). During the public ministry of Jesus, Satan was apparently inactive. But, as Jesus withdrew from the active life, Satan found the opportunity to operate again. The physical absence of Jesus created a big crisis for the disciples and until he returns they will have to face severe temptations. This is the time of the Church.

It was in this situation that Jesus told them to sell the tunic and to buy the sword. This sword was to be used not against people but Satan who would tempt them to denounce their faith. Their faith needed to be strengthened and that cannot be done by using a sword made of metal. Jesus had told them how to face the temptations, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Lk 22, 40). Peter and his companions, who failed to remain awake and pray, did fall into temptation. Using the sword at the last moment did not save them. Thus, viewed in the

general perspective of St. Luke, it is clear that the command to buy “a sword” was not to be taken literally.

The revolution Jesus envisaged was not to be executed with weapons. There are many reasons to conclude that Jesus did not support an armed revolt. Though some of the disciples were members of the Zealot movement, he did not accept or encourage their ideas and mode of operation. When the disciples wanted to destroy the Samaritans who refused to let them pass through, Jesus rebuked them saying that the Son of man came to give life not to destroy it (Lk 9, 54-56). Through his words and deeds, Jesus taught the disciples to promote life and embrace nonviolence.

His teaching did not reflect the ideas of a political revolutionary. The general law in society was “eye for an eye” and “tooth for tooth” but Jesus taught them to love the enemies and to pray for those who hurt them. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them back. And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them” (Lk 6, 27-31). Such ideas are certainly revolutionary but not of an armed revolution or one that could be executed using weapons.

Not only in words but also in action, Jesus depicted this new mentality. After crucifying Jesus, his enemies mocked him and celebrated their victory. Jesus did not hate them, but prayed for them, interceded for them, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk 23, 34). Jews who valued freedom more than life considered the Romans as their enemies but Jesus did not have such a hostile attitude towards them. He was ready to go to the house of the Centurion who came, begging to heal his servant. Jesus praised the faith of the Centurion who was a pagan and a representative of the foreign dominion over Israel, and pointed

out that he was a better believer than the Jews and declared him as an heir to the Kingdom of God (Mt 8, 5-13). He accepted and loved all, regardless of their cast, creed and nationality.

The kind of transformation Jesus envisaged for the nation was not one brought about by destroying the existing structures and orders. He never did anything to overthrow the existing authority or to take over any position. In fact, he deliberately avoided every opportunity and possibility to be in positions of power. According to the Gospels, the way he dealt with the temptations in the desert could be cited as an example for his attitude towards being in high positions.

All three Synoptic Gospels have recorded the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. St. Mark depicted in a simple statement, "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him" (Mk 1, 13). But, Mathew and Luke explained in detail three different temptations he faced. John does not talk about such a temptation in the beginning of Jesus' public life. But, all the Evangelists including John, depict that Jesus, during his public life, met with the kind of temptations he experienced in the wilderness. What are presented as three temptations by Mathew and Luke are not particular temptations at a given moment and time but the obstacles Jesus faced all through his public life.

All three temptations deal with the same issue: how to accomplish the salvation of humanity. Three ways are presented: give food for the hungry, perform miracles and cease power. Though they look like three different ways, they are centered on a single issue that is "Power". Turning stones into bread points to the Exodus event. If the new Savior gives bread, following the way Moses fed the people with manna in the desert, the people would believe him and accept him as their leader. After the miraculous multiplication of bread, "When the people saw the sign which he had done, they said, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!" (Jn 6, 14). Immediately they

wanted to make Jesus their king but Jesus “withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (Jn 6, 15). Getting power by giving bread was not part of his plan. His plan went beyond bread and earthly power. The statement, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt. 4, 4), points to God and to the will of God.

The miracles Jesus performed also should be understood in the same sense. The Gospels presented miracles as signs. The Jews believed that the awaited Messiah would perform miracles and thus confirm his mission. “The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven, to test him” (Mk 8, 11). “Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform?” (Jn 6, 30). Again Jesus responded emphasizing the salvific plan of God.

The desire to attain worldly power is presented as the third temptation. “The devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours” (Lk 4, 5-7). The words of the tempter revealed the true nature of power in the world. Any person in authority who establishes domination over the people and finds joy in the arbitrary use of power are devilish and it implies a denial of God. Jesus rejected every structure that promoted one’s supremacy over another person but held up the all-embracing power of Almighty God. Hence, Jesus responded to the tempter who asked him to bow his head before worldly power, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve” (Lk 4, 8).

All praise and glory belongs to God who is the center of life. God is the lord of the universe and nobody else should take over this authority. The essence of the revolution Jesus advocated was none other than the first of the Ten Commandments, that exhorted that man must worship only God. It is from this ultimate

reference point, that Jesus viewed all the set ups and structures. Jesus made this clear in his final discourse to his disciples. “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves” (Lk 22, 25-26).

If we understand the above statement in its true meaning, it is sufficient to create solid changes in every aspect of human life. The mighty will be thrown out of their seats. All will acknowledge that power belongs only to God and all human beings are equal. This conviction cannot help but create radical changes in the attitudes and life style of all. It will not be a change forced from outside but a change caused by a conversion of mind and acceptance of the plan and will of God. In short, the revolution Jesus advocated touches the soul of the human being, not the external structure. Without understanding this fundamental truth, if one concentrates on certain external events, he/she would fail to understand the real meaning of the revolution Jesus advocated.

The true revolution envisioned by Jesus starts not with the structure but with the value system. This cannot be attained by the use of arms or power. True change starts in the mind and that is why Jesus started his mission with the invitation for conversion. All the Evangelists repeatedly point out the sad truth that even the disciples who saw, heard and lived with him did not understand the true meaning of this invitation. Jesus did not promise earthly glory to his followers. They were not taught to sacrifice their lives to attain power in the world. What Jesus taught was the power of the cross. To be with Jesus one has to walk behind him carrying his own cross. “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared” (Mk 10, 39-40).

Jesus was a totally misunderstood person. He who proclaimed the Kingdom of God was considered as a conspirator for kingship. He who demonstrated the unending love and unlimited mercy of God was accused of blasphemy. He who advocated unconditional love for the enemy was accused of being a terrorist. He who invited a conversion of heart was accused of being a revolutionary. Not only the political and religious leaders and common people but also his own beloved disciples did not understand him. For an outside observer, Jesus might have appeared to be a revolutionary who tried to cause disturbance and topple the power structure. A closer look and a deeper analysis of his words and deeds would show that the revolutionary aspect touches only the surface of his personality. One who advocates changes on the level of heart and emphasizes the supremacy of God is not a revolutionary but a Prophet!

6. A PROPHET FROM GALILEE

We have seen that for the question who is Jesus, the response that he was a revolutionary from Nazareth would not suffice. The next step in our search brings us to the answer that he was a prophet. The Evangelists asserts that many of his contemporaries including his disciples and followers, considered Jesus as a prophet. On certain occasions, Jesus presented himself as a prophet and his mission as a prophetic mission. Hence, we turn to those parts of the Gospels which depict Jesus as a prophet.

First of all, we shall analyze the historical facts narrated in the Gospels regarding Jesus as a prophet. This would be helpful to understand what the people, the disciples and finally Jesus himself thought about the subject. After that, we shall take a closer look at the recordings of each Evangelist to find the meaning and importance each Evangelist gave to this title. Finally an attempt will be made to understand the meaning of the term prophet in the New Testament Christology and its relevance today.

“Some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophesy!” And the guards received him with blows” (Mk 14, 65).

During that horrible night, the Jewish leadership failed miserably. The mock trial was finished in a hurry and the judges began to wear the cap of executioners. The general impression given by the Evangelist was that it was the members of the Sanhedrin that covered the face of Jesus and spit on

him, demanding to prophecy. It was not a justifiable reaction against the one who had uttered blasphemy. It was the supreme expression of all the hatred and disgust they had against Jesus.

However, it is evident that there was a common understanding that Jesus was a prophet and that is why they asked him to prophecy after covering his eyes and smearing his face with spittle. Even when they went beyond all decency and fell into the bottom of cruelty, they challenged him to prophecy.

The teaching of Jesus often provoked the Jewish leaders. With the parable of the tenants of the vineyard Jesus had pronounced the final judgment on the leaders and they wanted to manhandle him but withdrew from the attempt because of the people who surrounded Jesus. “When they tried to arrest him, they feared the multitudes, because they held him to be a prophet” (Mt 21, 46). During the royal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the people accompanied him with shouts of joy and when they asked who it was, “The crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee “ (Mt 21, 11).

Jesus the Prophet-Opinion of the Common People

Jesus was considered as a prophet not only during the last days in Jerusalem but all through the days of his public life. At the end of the Galilean ministry, Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do men say that I am” (Mk 8, 27) and they responded “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets “(Mk 8, 28). With a little variation, Mathew and Luke have recorded the same opinion. However, Mathew added Jeremiah (16, 14) to the list of attributions of prophets. In short, in the eyes of the common people, Jesus was a prophet.

In connection with the fear of Herod, St. Mark had presented this issue before. When rejected at Nazareth, with the co-operation of the disciples, Jesus expanded his operation all through Galilee. With this Jesus became very popular and the news reached Herod Antipas, the local ruler of Galilee. People

came up with various opinions about this new personality. But, Herod was convinced that this was none but John the Baptist whom he had beheaded, who had come back to life to haunt him. John was a threat to the blood stained life of Herod and his wife. Haunted by guilt feelings he became a slave of greater fear and said, "John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?" (Lk 9,9). It was in connection with this feeble autocrat, that Mark presented for the first time the popular opinion about Jesus. "King Herod heard of it; for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him" (Mk 6, 14). Luke also recorded the same thing using almost the same words (Lk 9, 7-9).

All these were the opinion of the people in general. The Gospels have recorded also individuals questioning and proclaiming Jesus as a Prophet. Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman at the well and while talking about her past, she said that she has no husband. "Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly" (Jn 4, 17-18). Being convinced that this man who knew her past was a prophet, "The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet" (Jn 4, 19). The Samaritan woman believed that only the prophets could know the untold secrets. Her next question points to the mission of the prophet, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship" (Jn 4, 20). She hoped that the prophet would give a trustworthy answer regarding the place of true worship.

The Samaritans believed that a prophet who is capable of giving the final answer to all the disputed issues would come. He will be called "Taheb", the one to come. This belief was based on the Old Testament promise that a prophet like Moses would come (Dt. 18, 15-18). The Samaritans who separated themselves

from Israel after the time of King Solomon accepted only the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) as Sacred Scripture. They accepted the promises of a Savior only as recorded in these five books. Since they remained alienated from Judea, they did not expect a Savior connected to the house of David. While Israel awaited the Messiah to be the son of David, the Samaritans expected the Messiah to be a prophet like Moses. Anyway, the mission of that Prophet was to teach the law of the Lord and to lead the people to freedom.

The Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Rabbis were witness to the fact that Israel also awaited such a Messiah. Judas Maccabeus recovered the Altar that was desecrated by the Syrians by killing pigs on it. Then a legal problem emerged regarding the altar. The altar was holy and consecrated and therefore it should not be destroyed. At the same time since it was desecrated and therefore it cannot be used to offer sacrifices. "They deliberated what to do with the altar of burnt offering, which had been profaned. And they thought it best to tear it down, lest it bring reproach upon them, for the Gentiles had defiled it. So they tore down the altar and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them" (1 Mc 4, 44-47). Among the Qumran scrolls, there is a scroll named "Social law" in which it is recorded that the "Essene monks" believed that a prophet like Moses would come (IQ 9,11). The priests sent some representative to observe John the Baptist to whom they asked, "Are you the prophet" because they also had expected the prophet to come. It was due to this common belief that existed in Palestine that the people saw Jesus as the Prophet.

The people who had gathered to listen to him had remained without food for a long time. Jesus felt compassion for them and he fed them multiplying bread miraculously. Seeing the sign he had performed, they acclaimed, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!" (Jn 6, 14). They believed that Jesus was

a prophet like Moses who liberated the people from the slavery in Egypt and that he is capable of freeing Israel from the dominion of Rome. That is why they tried to make him king. For the people, Jesus was the prophet for whom the world awaited.

Jesus feeling compassion for the widow of Nain whose only son had died, restored his life and the people who saw this said, "A great prophet has arisen among us" (Lk 7, 16). From the way St. Luke recorded the episode, it seems to have reminded the people about the prophet Elijah who raised the son of the widow of Zarephath. People believed that Prophet Elijah, who was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire, would return (2 Kgs 2, 2-12). "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse" (Mal 4, 5-6). "Then the prophet Elijah arose like a fire, ... How glorious you were, O Elijah, in your wondrous deeds! ... You who were taken up by a whirlwind of fire, ... to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury, to turn the heart of the father to the son, and to restore the tribes of Jacob" (Sir 48, 1-10).

These scripture passages gave the basis for the hope that Prophet Elijah would return to invite the people to conversion and to instruct them to run away from the upcoming disaster. They also believed that Elijah would reinstate the state of Israel and help those who are in danger especially during the time of their death. This popular faith is reflected in the response of the people to the cry of Jesus: "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" that is, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "This man is calling Elijah." And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait; let us see whether Elijah will come to save him" (Mt 27, 46-49). Many of the contemporaries of Jesus saw him as Elijah. In Nain when Jesus raised the son of the widow, people besides

acclaiming him as a great prophet, added: “God has visited his people” (Lk 7, 16). They believed Jesus to be the prophet sent by God and that his presence would bring salvation.

Though the common people accepted Jesus as the prophet, the Jewish leaders rejected such an acclamation. When Jesus was at the table in the house of Simeon, a Pharisee, a well-known sinner came and fell at his feet. “When the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner” (Lk 7,39). The Pharisee believed that prophets are capable of knowing the secrets of the hearts and would avoid contact with sinners. Hence, the Pharisees could not accept him as a prophet but the way Jesus responded to the thoughts of Simeon proved his assumption to be false. Jesus knew not only the past of the woman but also the inner thoughts of the Pharisee. By his positive response to the woman, Jesus communicated the message that the mission of the prophet is not avoiding contact with sinners as the Pharisees did, but help them to rise from their miserable condition. A true prophet is not the enemy of the sinners but a loving friend who uplifts their spirit and restores their dignity.

There was a blind man sitting and begging at the entrance to the Jerusalem Temple. As long as he was blind, no one paid any attention to him. On a Sabbath, Jesus restored his vision by smearing mud on his eyes. Making the mud and smearing it were seen as breaking the law by the Pharisees. “Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” There was a division among them. So they again said to the blind man, “What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?” He said, “He is a prophet” (Jn 9, 16-17). Though the leaders did not agree with him, they could not respond to his argument. Again the people acclaimed Jesus as the prophet seeing the miracle he performed.

Opinion of the Disciples

All three Synoptic Gospels have recorded a confession of faith that demonstrates that their faith in Jesus was different from that of the common people (Mk 8,3; Mt 16,1; Lk 9,20). Peter had said, “You are Christ, son of the living God” but it was because of a special revelation from God. Though at a given moment, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter made that confession, it had not really affected the disciples while they were with Jesus. Their actions and attitudes prove that they really did not know who Jesus was. With the death of Jesus all their hopes and aspirations fell apart. The words of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus show what they really believed.

“Down casted and disappointed the two disciples left Jerusalem. They recounted to Jesus who walked with them, their hopeless situation and how all their expectations fell apart. When Jesus asked what they were talking about, they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened” (Lk 24, 19-21). They had believed that Jesus was the powerful prophet who would liberate Israel. Though their hopes were shattered, their conviction that he was a prophet, did not change as they had heard his words and saw the miracles and signs he performed.

The early Christian community also believed in a Prophet like Moses. In his speech in the Jerusalem Temple, Peter emphasized this fact. To prove that Jesus was the awaited Savior, Peter quoted from the Old Testament, “Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul that does not listen to that prophet shall be separated from the people’” (Acts 3, 22-23). On the day

of Pentecost, in his first speech also, Peter depicted Jesus as a prophet like Moses. “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know...this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2, 22-23). “Wonders and signs” refers to the miracles that occurred in connection with the Exodus. God, who liberated the people of Israel through Moses, in the same way, worked in Jesus also. Thus the hope that a prophet like Moses would come was fulfilled in Jesus.

Stephen who listed accusations against the Jewish leadership, citing examples from the Old Testament also presented Jesus as a prophet like Moses. “He led them out, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up’” (Acts 7, 36-37). The disciples who tried to understand Jesus and the early Christians accepted the concept that Jesus was a prophet like Moses. However, this concept is not sufficient to explain the entire personality of Jesus.

In the words of Jesus

Jesus counted himself among the prophets who were rejected by their own people. He expressed this idea when he was rejected in Nazareth, his own home town. “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country” (Lk 4, 24; Mk 6, 4; Mt 13, 57; Jn 4, 44). With slight differences all four Evangelists recorded the same words uttered by Jesus. Eventually it became a proverb. Through these words Jesus was explaining how his message will be received by his own people. In fact he was predicting that his own fate will not be different from that of the other prophets in Israel and that his mission was a prophetic mission.

Herod, the king of Galilee heard of the activities of Jesus and his disciples in Galilee. He began to fear that John the Baptist whom he beheaded had returned to hound him and the king began to observe the activities of Jesus very carefully. He concluded that Jesus was even more dangerous than John and sought to kill him. When the Pharisees informed Jesus that Herod sought to kill him, he responded "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, 32-33). No one could stop Jesus from doing the work the heavenly Father had entrusted to him. Jesus acknowledged that he will be killed but not by Herod. It will happen in Jerusalem in accordance with the prophetic tradition, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Lk 13, 34-35). Israel had failed to accept the prophets sent to them. By counting himself as one of them Jesus takes his stand in the line of the prophets.

Some of the parables also express the same idea. In the parable of the banquet, (Lk 14, 15-24; Mt 22, 1-10) the first servants sent to invite the guests were the prophets. Through the prophets the people were informed of the will of God. The parable gave the impression that Jesus was the last servant of God sent at the decisive moment.

The parable of the vineyard also gives the same message (Mk 12,1-12; Mt 21, 33-42; Lk 20, 9 -19) with more force. The servants sent to collect the rent were the prophets. When all of them were rejected the master sent his only son. But, the son was treated in the worst way possible. The master of the vineyard is

God and the estate represents God's salvific plan. By this, Jesus was presenting the history of Israel, urging them to make the decision. At the same time, he gave a hint about his own death. The son of God was sent as the last prophet. By killing him, Israel was casting themselves out of the salvific plan of God. When Jesus made this judgment, the leaders knew that he was talking about them and they tried to kill him immediately.

According to the words of Jesus, the view of the disciples and the common people, Jesus was a prophet. All the same, no one can deny that different people have different concepts about the prophets. This is true in the case of the Evangelists also. It is a historical fact that Jesus entered the scene and was killed as a prophet. But, not all the Evangelists gave the same importance to these historical facts. Hence, it is important to look into the significance, each one gives to the concept of "prophet".

7. JESUS – PROPHET ACCORDING TO THE EVANGELISTS

The Gospel accounts have proven that the contemporaries and the disciples of Jesus saw him as a prophet. Jesus presented himself as a prophet and predicted that his end would be similar to that of the prophets. The scattered information in the Gospels depicts the historical facts. Each evangelist gave various levels of importance to the concept of Jesus as the prophet.

Many of the Bible Scholars are of the opinion that the term prophet was used by the contemporaries of Jesus to explain his personality and activities but the term has little significance after the resurrection of Jesus. To expose the personality of Jesus in the light of the resurrection, St. Paul as well as the other Apostles gave no importance to the term “prophet”. All through the epistles, the term prophet was not used to refer to Jesus. The terms used for Jesus were Christ, Lord, Savior etc. Hence most of the Bible Scholars concluded that Jesus was seen as a prophet only during his life time and the concept of him as a prophet was completely relinquished after the resurrection of Jesus. However, a careful search through the Gospels would show that the above conclusion is not fully acceptable. At least some of the Gospels gave great importance in depicting Jesus as a “prophet”.

MARK

Most of the bible scholars agree that the Gospel of Mark was the first Gospel to be written. In this Gospel, the term prophet did not have much importance. According to St. Mark, seeing the miracles Jesus performed, the common people

considered him as a prophet. “King Herod heard of it; for Jesus’ name had become known. Some said, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him.” But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” But when Herod heard of it he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised” (Mk 6, 14-16). Since Mark felt that seeing Jesus only as a prophet was not acceptable, he omitted the concept while recording the profession of faith made by the disciples (Mk 8, 27-29).

The voice from heaven resounded on Mount Tabor at the time of the transfiguration of Jesus, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him” (Mk 9,7) was a combination of the first words of Song of Songs and a part of the prophecy that a prophet like Moses would come (Dt 18, 15-18). Since the command to listen to Jesus was a citation from Deuteronomy, Jesus was compared to Moses. But, Mark did not give much importance to this concept. The Sanhedrin members blindfolded Jesus and while hitting asked him to “prophecy” (Mk 14, 65) to mock him as they might have seen him as a false prophet. Though Mark has recorded that Jesus referred to himself as prophet, while experiencing rejection in his home town, Nazareth, the evangelist did not give much importance to the concept of Jesus being a prophet.

MATHEW

St. Mathew who had gotten into conflict with the Pharisaic interpretation of religion and wrote the Gospel, mainly for the Jewish Christians has given more importance to the concept of Jesus the prophet. Besides the parts where Mark recorded Jesus as a prophet (Mt. 13, 57; 16,14), Mathew added some other incidents where Jesus was depicted as a prophet. Mathew has recorded a particular incident of the people referring to Jesus as the prophet from Galilee. When Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey accompanied by a great multitude shouting Hosanna, onlookers asked: “who is he?”. The response was:

“the prophet from Galilee”. The Jewish leadership was afraid to put their hands on Jesus because the people considered him to be a prophet (Mt 21, 26).

These explanations could be considered as part of a tradition that existed among the Jews. However, Mathew has made a deliberate attempt to compare Jesus to Moses. This effort was more evident in the Infancy narrative (Mt 1-2). As Pharaoh had tried to kill Moses when he was child, Herod tried to kill Jesus when he was a baby. As Moses lived in the desert until the death of Pharaoh, Jesus lived in Egypt until the death of Herod. As Moses returned to Egypt after Pharaoh's death, Jesus returned to Palestine after the death of Herod. The return of Jesus from Egypt reminds the operation of Moses to liberate Israel from the slavery in Egypt.

Apparently Mathew continued the comparison while recording the public life of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) provided new regulations for the new Covenant as Moses gave the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel in the valley of Mount Zion. The next ten miracles Jesus performed resembled the ten miracles God performed through Moses in Egypt. Though Mathew compared Jesus to Moses, the evangelist has made every effort to emphasize the fact that Jesus was greater than Moses. Jesus corrected and gave new meaning to the laws of Moses. He began his teaching with the preface, “You have heard that it was said to the men of old,”... But I say to you” (Mt 5, 21-22).

The miracles performed in Egypt were destructive to the people of Egypt though they liberated the people of Israel. The miracles Jesus performed provided only healing and no destruction for any one. People who were tormented by physical and mental illness and weighed down by guilt feelings received healing in body and soul. Moses helped the people to attain political and social liberation. But, the teaching and miracles of Jesus provided integrated liberation for the individuals.

Although Mathew thus took care to present Jesus as a prophet like Moses, as expected by Israel, he does not limit the presentation of Jesus to this category. Besides in the Christology of Mathew there were terms that were more important than “prophet”. The Gospel of Mathew started with “the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David” because he felt that it would be more appropriate to introduce Jesus as the expected Messiah. Mathew emphasized that Jesus Christ is the King of the Jews, rejected by the Jews and accepted by the Gentiles. He is the Son of God, “Immanuel”, that is, God with us, born of a virgin in the house of David and He will be with us till the end of time. For the theme, “a prophet like Moses” had only secondary importance in the Gospel of Mathew.

JOHN

John is a person who tried to delve into the depth of the personality of Jesus. He saw Jesus as the “Word of God” put on flesh or human form. For him Jesus was much more than a prophet and so he did not give much importance in depicting Jesus as a prophet. However he also agreed that the common people saw Jesus as a prophet. Hence, John presented him not as a mere prophet but as the “eschatological” prophet.

The Samaritan woman at the well in Sicar, saw Jesus as a prophet (Jn 4, 19) but at the end of the conversation, Jesus appears not as a prophet but as Christ (Jn 4, 29). The blind man who received sight, at first said that Jesus was a prophet but at the end of the conversation Jesus was acknowledged as the Son of man (Jn 9, 35) and the Lord (Jn 9, 38). The blind man who started seeing Jesus as a prophet, at the end worshipped him, thus acknowledging that he is equal to God. (Jn 9, 38).

The people who were fed in the wilderness, proclaimed Jesus as the awaited Prophet, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!” (Jn 6, 14). With these words they were accepting Jesus as the “eschatological prophet” who had come

to inaugurate the age of salvation. The picture that came up in their mind was that of Moses who liberated the people of Israel and led them through the desert. Following this, an attempt was made to make Jesus their king. In all these, it was the people who saw Jesus as a prophet. For the Evangelist, it had only some historical significance. It was insufficient to reveal the depth of Jesus' personality.

LUKE

More than the other Evangelists, Luke gave more importance to the concept of prophet in presenting Jesus. The fact that Jesus was presented as a prophet seven times in the Gospel (Lk 4, 34; 7, 16.39; 9, 7-8.19; 13, 33; 24, 19) and two times in the Acts of the Apostles, shows the importance St. Luke gives to the term. Moreover, the theme, "Jesus the Prophet" affects the general structure of the Gospel of Luke.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus started his public ministry with a proclamation in the Synagogue of Nazareth. Today the Bible scholars consider it as the *policy speech* or the *Nazareth Manifesto* of Jesus who started the speech quoting from the Book of Prophet Isaiah (61, 1). The Jews had considered it as a promise about the prophet who would come to inaugurate the age of salvation. It was uttered by Isaiah III, to give hope to the people who lived in utter misery, after returning from the Babylonian exile (Neh 5, 1-5). The prophet proclaimed it as an explanation of his own call but eventually it became a prophecy of the eschatological prophet.

Jesus, who started his ministry citing the words that explains the ministry of the eschatological prophet, announced that this prophecy was fulfilled in him (Lk 4, 21). Luke tries in the Nazareth episode (Lk 4, 16-30) to highlight Jesus' prophetic mission and his cruel end in blood. Since the theme, Jesus the prophet, is presented here with great importance, it needs to be examined more closely.

8. THE GOSPEL OF THE PROPHET

The Nazareth Episode

The Evangelists, Mathew and Mark have recorded that in the middle of his activities in Galilee, Jesus came to Nazareth, his own home town but he could not perform any miracles there because of their lack of faith. They presented the Nazareth episode as part of the explanations of the opposition against Jesus. Rejection in the home-town was considered as a prophetic experience and Jesus counted himself among the prophets who were rejected by their own people.

Mathew and Mark presented the Nazareth episode without affecting the structure of the Gospels. But, Luke presented the same at the beginning of the public ministry, giving the episode much more importance. Luke presented the life of Jesus in a nutshell in the detailed presentation of the Nazareth episode.

On a Sabbath day, Jesus returned to his home town where he grew up and took part in the service in the Synagogue. As part of the service Jesus got up to read from the Sacred Scripture. All were surprised that the son of a carpenter dared to read in public. After reading a part from the book of the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus returned the book and then sat down to give an explanation of the reading.

To the people who were watching him intently, Jesus announced, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4, 21). They were shocked to hear that statement

as they had believed that the prophecy of Isaiah will be fulfilled only with the coming of the Kingdom of God. Slowly the wonder gave way to doubts and they began to question how a carpenter's son dared to make such a statement. Next they challenged him to perform a miracle and prove that he was the awaited Prophet. Instead of responding to their challenge, Jesus retorted that he would not perform any miracle in Nazareth and he added that no prophet is accepted in his own home town. Fruits of the labor of the prophets, sent to Israel, will be enjoyed not by the Israelites but by the Gentiles. As a proof of this, Jesus cited two examples from the life of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. People became deeply hostile to him and decided the prophet who did not comply with their wish, must not be allowed to live. Determined to kill him they put him out of the city and then led him to the cliff of the hill on which their city was built and planned to push him off the cliff. But Jesus passing through their midst, went away from Nazareth.

With great literary skill, Luke gave this episode its structure and form. It has two parts: 4, 16-22; and 23-30. In the first part Jesus revealed his mission. In the second part there was mutual rejection between Jesus and the people of Nazareth. According to the general view of the Gospel of Luke, Nazareth represented the people of Israel. The rejection in Nazareth foreshadowed the death of Jesus and Israel being cast out of the main line of Salvation history.

As a policy statement, the prophecy Jesus cited, deserves special attention. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Lk 4, 18-19). Although Luke was citing from the book of the Prophet Isaiah 61, 1-2, he made a slight change in the quotation. He changed the original "consolation to the broken hearted" to "liberation

to the oppressed". This was taken from the part that dealt with the true meaning of fasting (Is 58, 6) to give emphasis to the mission of liberation. By saying that the prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus, he was proclaiming that he was the eschatological prophet whom the people had been waiting for.

The first proclamation was that Jesus received the spirit through an anointing. This refers to the Baptism in the Jordan. As Jesus came out of the water after the Baptism, the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in the form of a dove and that is depicted as anointing by Luke. Jesus perceived this as the beginning of his prophetic mission. This was repeated again by Peter while in the house of Cornelius, when he said, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10, 38). The aim of this anointing was fulfilled as "he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10, 38). By saying that Jesus, after overcoming the temptations in the wilderness, "returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee" (Lk 4, 14), Luke asserts that all the activities of Jesus were inspired by the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament prophets, the Spirit often came and led them but in the case of Jesus the Spirit stayed with him at all times

According to the epistles of St. Paul, the operation of the Holy Spirit consists in the sanctification of the soul. But the aim of the Holy Spirit, according to the Gospel of St. Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, is prophesying. Prophesying means proclamation of the Good News through words and deeds.

The one who is anointed by the Spirit is sent by God. The statement that "He has sent me" signified the awareness of his mission. St. Luke has repeated many times that Jesus knew that he was sent by God for a particular mission (Lk 4,43; 9,48; 10,16). The one who is sent fulfills the will of the One who sent him and for this he must remain in constant communication with the sender. More than the other Evangelists, Luke emphasized this constant communion and intimate relationship.

Since Jesus maintained this relationship through prayer, Luke gave great importance to the prayer life of Jesus. According to St. Luke, Jesus spent long time in prayer, in intimate communication with the Father, before making all the important decisions in his life. In fact his life was a constant prayer, “He withdrew to the wilderness and prayed” (Lk 5, 16). Seven times Luke has recorded about Jesus’ prayer (3, 21; 5, 16; 6, 12; 9, 18. 28-29; 11.1; 22, 40-44). Since Jesus kept constant contact with the Father through prayer, he was speaking and acting on God’s own authority. In this perspective, what is important is God and his activities. In short, Jesus was the representative of God and that is the mission of the prophet.

Jesus came to preach the Good News to the poor and it was further explained as “release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed”. All these were summarized in one phrase: “An acceptable year of the Lord”. In the prophecy of Isaiah priority was given to economic and social liberation as it was addressed to a people who lived in great poverty. They were forced to pledge their homes for food and being unable to pay off the debts went to jail and then became slaves. The prophet announced that he was sent to proclaim a jubilee year that would grant them liberation. Jesus claimed that this mission was fulfilled in him.

The mission Jesus took upon was a mission of liberation that would give freedom to the oppressed. By healing the sick and the infirmed and granting forgiveness of sins to the sinners, Jesus was fulfilling this mission. Luke depicted all the miracles Jesus performed as part of this mission. Luke does not present poverty as a spiritual virtue neither does he limit it to material wealth. Deliberately omitting “healing of the broken hearted”, Luke prevented the possibility of explaining poverty as repentance of sin or childlike innocence or placing total trust in God. For Luke the oppressed were those who were exploited by the evil social structure. The poor were the common people

who were cast out of the main line of society, accusing them of being sinners and outcasts by birth or work. God looks at them with compassion not because of their humility or innocence but because of their helpless situation. The mission of Jesus was to proclaim liberation for these people and inform them that their slavery has come to an end.

Jesus was fulfilling this mission when he announced, “Blessed are the poor”. He was fulfilling the policy statement he made in Nazareth when he shared table fellowship with the tax collectors, praised the love of the sinful woman, and exhorted to invite the poor and the cripple for the banquet because they will be the ones who will sit at table in the Kingdom of God. The same message was given when the disciples of John the Baptist asked him, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” . . . And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them” (Lk 7, 19-22). In short, Luke presented the words and deeds of Jesus as that of the eschatological prophet.

The Nazareth episode ends with the attempt to kill Jesus. Luke presents the death of Jesus as the martyrdom of a prophet. The attempt they made on the hill in Nazareth was realized on another “mountain” because Jesus had said, “it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem” (Lk 13, 33). According to Luke, the death of Jesus was caused by his prophetic mission.

To denote the public ministry and death, the term St. Luke used was “Jesus the Prophet”. This is evident from the words of the disciples on the way to Emmaus, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Lk 24, 19-21).

Even while presenting Jesus as the eschatological prophet, Luke makes it clear that the personality of Jesus cannot be limited to that of a prophet. He was more than a prophet. Like the other Evangelists, Luke also presented Jesus as Christ, Lord, Son of God and Savior. Luke also agreed that to depict the depth of the personality of Jesus, the concept of a prophet is inadequate. However, the term was helpful to explain his activities and death.

All four evangelists handled the concept of “Jesus the prophet” in different ways. Mark gave least importance to this term. Mathew and John gave the term some importance. Luke saw it as a very important element of Christology. In the next step, an attempt will be made to take a closer look at the historical Jesus in the light of the knowledge received from the Gospels. Why did the people see Jesus as a prophet? Who is a prophet? How was the prophetic mission fulfilled in the historical Jesus?

9. PROPHET – ONE SENT BY GOD

When the common people and the disciples depicted Jesus as a prophet, they had a concept of prophet in their mind. In the history of Israel, there were a large number of prophets from Moses to Malachi. John the Baptist who came to prepare the way for the Messiah also was considered as a prophet. Seeing that the words and deeds of Jesus were similar to those of the prophets, the people considered him to be a prophet. To understand the concept formed by the contemporaries of Jesus about him, a comparative study might be helpful. Who was a prophet in the eyes of the common people? How did Jesus fit into this prophetic concept? Search for an answer to these questions will lead to a historical study on the self concept, life style, teachings and activities of Jesus.

No true prophet comes in his own name. Neither does one take up the prophetic mission on his own. The first sign of a genuine prophet is a deep conviction that God has sent him with a particular mission. They knew that God came into their lives at a particular moment of time in a special way. Hence a prophet is one who has received a call. A number of prophets have recorded in detail the history of their call.

The prophets received their call in a wide variety of situations. Moses was a man of forty years and was grazing the sheep of his father-in-law when he received the call from God (Ex 3, 1-12). Samuel was an young boy who was staying with the priest in the synagogue, attending the sanctuary lamp, when he received the call (1 Sam 3, 1-18). The Prophet Isaiah was in the temple, when he received the call (Is 6, 1-3). Some received the

call through a vision while some others did so through listening. While receiving the call Isaiah had a vision of the Glory of God, Ezekiel swallowed a scroll (Ez 3, 1-4), Jeremiah heard the voice of the one who called him (Jer 1, 4-10) and Amos had a vision of a plumb line being held on top of a slanted wall (Am 7, 7-9). Just as the circumstances of the call varied, the people who received them came from different walks of life. Amos was a shepherd, Micah was a farmer and Ezekiel was a priest. The majority of the prophets did not belong to the official structure and their call was not received through an official function.

After the call, none of the prophets could continue their lives as they used to, because the mission demanded total change in their life style. Amos the shepherd of Tekoa left his home and started preaching in the Northern kingdom of Israel. His voice resounded in the land like the roaring of a lion. Micah left Moresheth and came to Jerusalem and delivered powerful speeches in spite of ardent opposition. Jeremiah stood alone against kings, lords, priests and people. Ezekiel, at times, acted like an insane man. None of them lived like the general public after receiving the call which had turned them into new persons. They did not bend their knee before opposition. Their strength came from the conviction that God had chosen and entrusted them with a mission. The words of Micah revealed this conviction: “As for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (Micah 3, 8).

No force could divert the genuine prophets from fulfilling the mission entrusted to them. Amos who was banned from Bethel did not turn back but continued to preach with more force and courage. The prophets may face obstacles and difficulties, they may list their complaints to God, but would not go off track even for a moment, even when their lives were at risk. The Lord said to Jeremiah, “Behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole

land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you” (Jer 1, 18-19).

Their faith and trust that the Lord will be with them, strengthened them and gave them courage to withstand all obstacles. They stood alone without the support of any institution or person. It was this faith that gave authority to their words. They possessed an inner authority that no one could destroy or intimidate. Without fear, they challenged the corrupted structure, confronted the priests and kings. It was God’s authority and power that they used.

All these attributes were evident in Jesus. He made a living by working as a carpenter until the age of thirty. He neither studied under any famous Rabbis nor held any office in the Jewish religion. This seemingly ordinary man left his workshop and received Baptism in the Jordan and that marked a turning point in his life. Seeing the incident as his call, Jesus started his prophetic mission. The people remembered this episode when Jesus proclaimed, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Lk 4, 18), Many of the statements of Jesus, recorded in the Gospels, revealed that he lived with the deep conviction that he was sent by God. “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose” (Lk 4, 43).

There are many parables in which Jesus compared his mission to that of the prophets. The servants sent out to invite the guests represented the prophets. The very last servant who was sent to inform the guests that everything was ready represented none other than Jesus himself (Lk 14, 15-24). The servants sent to the vineyard to collect the share were Old Testament prophets and the only son sent at the

end was Jesus (Mk 12, 1-12). Jesus was the last link in the chain of prophets sent to Israel which signifies that he was the Eschatological prophet.

No one could sidetrack Jesus from his sacred mission. Jesus did not allow the compelling requests of the people (Lk 4, 42-43), counsel of the disciples (Mk 8, 23), suggestions of the relatives (Mk 3, 21) or the threat of the king (Lk 13, 31) to stand in the way of fulfilling his mission. He walked forward in spite of dire opposition and possible death saying, "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!" (Lk 12, 50). With this conviction, he went forward even when the people left him, authorities threatened to kill him, one of the disciples betrayed him and the head of the disciples denounced him.

All those who saw Jesus and heard his words were amazed because he spoke with authority and force. "When Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority and not as their scribes" (Mt 7, 28-29). Others quoted prophets and other famous Rabbis when teaching but Jesus did not quote or refer to any one while teaching. Without any hesitation he taught the true meaning of the existing laws with total conviction and full authority.

Jesus asserted that he came to fulfill the law and did not hesitate to make modifications even to the laws of Moses. His teaching with the introduction "you have heard it being said, but I tell you..." is a proof for this inner authority. The teaching with the preface, "truly, truly I say to you" depict supreme authority. Hearing this, the people wondered, "What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mk 1, 27). Jesus demonstrated this authority in the matter of Sabbath observance and other laws. Protesting against this use of authority, the Jewish leaders questioned him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" (Mk 11, 28). Rather

than giving them a direct answer, Jesus changed the focus to the authenticity of John with the assumption that if they agree that the authority of John came from God, Jesus who received Baptism from him and was witnessed by him should be coming from God. Hence, Jesus responded, “I will ask you a question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men? Answer me” (Mk 11, 29-30). The Jewish authority recognized that they were trapped by this question and they evaded the answer.

The authority of Jesus came from the One who sent him. Jesus who 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), considered that fulfilling the will of the Father was more important than sustaining life by consuming bread. Jesus told his disciples, “I have food to eat of which you do not know... “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (Jn 4, 32-34). Jesus had only one goal in his life and that was fulfilling the will of the One who sent him. He was not ready to make any compromise in this matter and till the end he remained faithful to this sacred goal. There were many occasions and temptations to deviate. But, in spite of threats and promises, obstacles and oppositions, he was determined to complete the ministry the Father entrusted to Him. Even when he felt that all had abandoned him and even the Father forsook him, he did not vacillate from his goal, till the last moment when he could shout in total gratification “It is finished” and surrendered his life into the hands of the Father and breathed his last.

Observing from a distance, the call, fidelity to the mission entrusted, and the inner authority of words and deeds are similar to that of a prophet. However, a closer look would reveal that Jesus was above all other prophets. All his words and deeds revealed that his self-identity could not be limited to a prophet as he was more than a prophet.

Jesus addressed the One who sent him, “Abba”, “Father”. He was the only son who was sent to the tenants. On the occasion of Baptism and transfiguration, God the Father revealed him as “my beloved Son”. The didactic style of Jesus was different from that of the prophets. While the prophets communicated God’s message with the preface “The Lord our God says...”, Jesus used the preface, “I tell you...” This is a sure evidence of using his authority. Though the call and mission were similar to that of a prophet, a closer look at that personality would reveal another picture. This picture will be analyzed in the last part of this book.

10. PROPHET – ADVOCATE OF JUSTICE

Prophets often emerged in the middle of a national disaster or a crisis that may be obvious or hidden. A national crisis may emerge when the land is affected by draught, wild fire, earthquake etc. An even greater crisis may occur when a powerful enemy attacks and threatens to destroy the nation. Such a disaster occurred in Israel when Emperor Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and took thousands as slaves to Babylon. The people fell into despair and feared that even God had abandoned them. God sent prophets to give them consolation and hope. The words of those prophets manifested the unfailing love and immense mercy of Almighty God and they were called prophets of hope as they were sent to give hope to the people who became convinced that the disaster that occurred to them was the inevitable consequences of their wrong doings. They urged the people to turn to God with hope.

There are also crises that are not so obvious. From the outside, everything may look good. There may be no threat of enemy attack as there was peace between the neighboring countries. The king and all the rich are living in luxury. Sacrifices and ceremonies were conducted in the temples. But, behind this apparent prosperity, common people live in misery. There were prophets who saw the seeds of disaster hidden in these seemingly peaceful situations. Most of the genuine prophets were sent during such a crisis. They saw the injustice that prevailed and perceived the existing peace as “calm before the storm”.

The prophets realized that only the upper class, the wealthy people, lived in luxury while the majority of the people were living in utter poverty. The prophets severely criticized the structural evil existing in those societies. They unveiled the mask of prosperity and demonstrations of piety and exposed the pathetic condition of society. They accused that the luxury of the few have forced the majority into starvation and misery. The prophets made an accurate social analysis and refused to accept that poverty and prosperity as the plan of God. In no uncertain terms they declared that poverty was caused by oppression and exploitation.

The prophets used strong words against the rich of society. “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” (Amos 5, 10-11). “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” (Micah 3, 9-10). “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” (Jere 5, 26-28). The prophets called the rich wicked, murderer etc. because they denied justice to the poor, the widows and the orphans, refused to pay just wage to the workers and lend money for unjust interest. The rich accumulated wealth exploiting the poor. Hence they declared that poverty was not the plan of God or the fate of the people but caused by the greed of the few.

Grand celebrations in the temple and offerings would not repair the sin caused by injustice. Even if they offer unceasing sacrifice on the Altars built under the golden dome and the

blood of the sacrificed animals flow like a river, God will not reconcile with the oppressors. The prophets who looked at society through the eyes of God, condemned the pious rituals performed by the rich who failed to listen to the cry of the poor, as idol worship (Am 8, 21-23; Is 1, 10-16). God will not listen to the prayer of the oppressor because they are not praying to the God who demands justice and liberation for all but a god they created in their own imagination.

According to the prophets Hosea and Isaiah who had made a clear analyze of the social structure, those who deny justice to the needy do not know God. “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. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air; and even the fish of the sea are taken away” (Hos 4, 1-3). The cause of all the evil in the land is that the people forgot God. “The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand.” 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” (Is 4, 3-4) The Lord heard the cry of the oppressed rising above and over the sound of praise that rose from the temple. The rich and powerful had accumulated wealth by exploiting the common people and thus became oppressors of the poor. This is the position of the prophets.

The voice of the prophet is the voice of Yahweh who liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt. God who sided with the enslaved Israelites against the oppressing force of Pharaoh later sided with the oppressed common people against the oppressing force of the authorities in Israel. The people in

authority included the kings and lords and the priests who offered sacrifices for their intentions and false prophets who justified their activities of injustice. An example is the word uttered by the Prophet Jeremiah, "I am full of the wrath of the LORD; I am weary of holding it in" (Jer 6, 11). The prophets who imbibed the spirit of God, lashed out against them with accusations and statements of judgment and they were called "prophets of doom".

The prophets demonstrated the wrath of God against the evils of society. They condemned the social structure that had forgotten God and pronounced judgment over its inevitable end. No one of the oppressing force was spared of their severe criticism. The royal diadem will become vacant; the king and his royal servants will go into slavery. The "cows of Bashan" who oppresses the poor will be dragged away, the luxury homes will lay waste and the temple that was the pride and joy of the people will be destroyed (Is 5, 8-9; Micah 3, 12; Amos 4, 1-3). The prophets asserted that no one but those in authority, especially the priests and false prophets, would be responsible for the disaster that will fall upon the nation. The priests and prophets, instead of guiding the people in the path of God, exploit them. "As robbers lie in wait for a man, so the priests are banded together; they murder on the way to Shechem, yea, they commit villainy" (Hos 6, 9) and with false promises they exploit the people (Hos 4, 4-10). Rather than seeing the true disaster the nation was in, "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 8, 10-11). When the foundation is shaken and cracks appear on the walls, they think that they can save the building by white washing. Such people are cheating the people and will be punished severely.

The prophets experienced great pain while communicating the severe punishment on the nation because they loved the people and wanted only what is best for them. National disasters

caused them deep pain. “My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. Disaster follows hard on disaster, the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are destroyed, my curtains in a moment” (Jer 4, 19-20). The prophets spoke about the impending disaster not because they wanted it to happen but to warn the people and to stop them from running into total disaster.

Only the prophets were aware of the apparently hidden disaster and they knew that the only way to avoid it was a return to the Lord with a contrite heart. A conversion that was manifested in the person as well as in the society must take place. Hence they exhorted a return to the Lord not by beautifying the temple and adding to the number of sacrifices but by diligently living by the precepts of the covenant. Stop corruption and execute justice to the people. “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: 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, 16-18). Genuine faith would lead to the re-establishment of justice. The prophets knew that only conversion of hearts would bring about lasting social justice and so they called for conversion on the level of hearts.

In summary, the prophets are those who perceived the impending disaster hidden in the apparent wellbeing. They unveiled the corruption that existed in the society and called to account those who were responsible for creating such a situation. Turning away from the Lord was the root cause of all social evils. The God of the oppressed would side with the oppressed against the oppressors. Their warning about the disaster was an attempt to bring about a conversion that would prevent the catastrophe. The Lord desires not the destruction

but the salvation of sinners by conversion. Hence the teachings of the prophets included social analysis, trial, accusation, judgment, call for conversion, threats of punishment, promise of forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Natural forces and enemies were instruments in the hands of God to be used to bring about conversion. God will purify the people through severe punishment. The prophets spoke of disaster to bring about conversion and salvation because they desired the ultimate good of the people.

11. PROPHETS – DRIVING FORCE FOR CHANGE

Israel was on the verge of a horrible disaster when Jesus entered the scene. The preaching of John the Baptist centered mostly on the impending disaster. Though the people, hearing John, rushed to receive Baptism, they failed to produce the fruits of conversion. As for the religious leaders, they stood aside and mocked at him (Lk 7, 33). Jesus began his preaching referring to the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist. All through his public life, his words had demonstrated an awareness of approaching national disaster.

Palestine was in a critical situation. The Zealots were preparing for armed revolt against the Roman Empire. The religious leaders tried to secure their position by being subservient to the Empire. Being victims of political and religious exploitation, the common people were living in utter poverty and misery. They were on the verge of open rebellion. The religious leaders, instead of understanding and consoling the poor in their plight, added to their misery by imposing traditional laws and rituals and pushing them out of the main line of society. The attitude of the leaders conveyed to the poor that they were cursed by God. While the Jerusalem Temple was thriving with sacrifices and celebrations, the poor of Yahweh suffered utter misery in mind and soul. The words of Jesus asserted that God had pronounced his judgment on the elite of society. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus warned about the impending disaster and called for a conversion of heart. However, the preaching of Jesus went beyond the mere

warnings about the disaster. It focused on the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus started his public ministry, announcing the coming of the hour of salvation. In the teaching of Jesus, Kingdom of God had more importance than the coming of disaster. All the same, he had given repeated warning that Israel would encounter a severe crisis. Most of the warnings were directed at the leaders.

A final judgment over the Jewish leadership was announced through the statement that the owner of the vineyard would destroy the tenants who not only refused to pay their due but also killed the only son of the master. "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them" (Mt 21, 45). Again referring to the Jewish leadership, Jesus said that all those who were invited will not taste the banquet of heaven. Then he added that the king would send the army and destroy the city and those who insulted the servants who were sent to invite the guests (Mt 22, 6-7). This parable indicated the destruction of Jerusalem.

Through the parable of the fig tree that failed to produce fruit, Jesus indicated that there was only little time left. The same warning was repeated when Jesus cursed the fig tree on the way to Jerusalem. The Evangelists recorded this in connection with the cleansing of the temple. The over grown fig tree, that looked good from the outside, resembled the Temple that had become a den of robbers. The dried up fig tree symbolized the fate of Israel and their Temple.

Not only through parables but also in clear, direct language, Jesus spoke about the destruction of Jerusalem. "The blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it shall be required of this generation" (Lk 11, 50-51).

Jesus foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem when no one else was aware of its possibility. “When he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Lk 19, 41-44). Jesus warned again about the destruction of Jerusalem. “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it; for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. Alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! For great distress shall be upon the earth and wrath upon this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Lk 21, 20-24).

When the disciples praised the beauty of the Temple, Jesus saw it shattered. “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). On the way to Calvary Jesus told the women who cried for him, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children... For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Lk 23, 28-31).

The situation in Israel was such that the disaster was inevitable. The enthusiasm of the Zealots, political manipulation of the religious leaders, and the fundamentalism of the priests only speeded up the inevitable disaster. Any far sighted, intelligent person could see the folly of daring to fight

against the Roman Empire. Though the religious leaders were submissive and obedient to the Roman authority, Rome was dissatisfied with the general situation in Palestine. Rome was provoked by various elements such as the sporadic violence of the Zealots, undying thirst for freedom and hostility toward the Roman rule and general dissatisfaction of the common people who were exploited and oppressed by the political and religious leaders. The numerous crosses raised in front of the Jerusalem gate were a constant reminder of Rome's power and manner of punishment. It was evident that if the explosive situation continued, Rome would respond strongly. Jesus was aware that Israel was fast approaching disaster under the leadership of blind leaders.

Jesus gave a religious explanation to the political event. The prophets always saw God's intervention in historical events. The national disaster was the punishment God executed over Israel for breaking the precepts of the Covenant. Jerusalem killed the prophets and messengers God sent to Israel and the destruction of the city and of the Temple would mark the end of the structures of the unfaithful Israel. The Jerusalem Temple is the symbol of Israel's religious leadership and its destruction marked the end of the priesthood of Levi and of the sacrifices. The highest authority of the Jewish religion, the Sanhedrin would be dismissed. Thus a total annihilation of Israel would take place. All these prophecies were fulfilled in 70 A.D. and Israel disappeared from the face of the world map.

What are the reasons that brought about this total disaster? Through parables, social analysis and symbolic activities, Jesus provided the explanation. The whole thing could be summarized in one simple phrase: the chosen people "did not produce fruit". Israel failed to carry out the mission God entrusted to them while choosing them as His own people. God liberated Israel to be a witness to "His liberation act" for all the nations in the world. Instead of proclaiming Yahweh as the God of the

oppressed, they made Him to be one who accepts offerings and sacrifices and hands out favors.

Those who were chosen to proclaim the unending mercy and unconditional love of God, set limitations for the poor even in the House of the Lord. Those who were chosen to protect the widows and the orphans and execute justice to the poor, exploited them and cast them out of society accusing them of being unclean and sinful. The very laws that were created to guarantee liberation to the oppressed were used as weapons of discrimination and oppression. In short, the chosen people of God turned away from God. Added to that, they took pride in being the guardians of the law and so the beloved of God. But, Jesus condemned these so called “holy” people. He accused them for killing the prophets and messengers God sent to them to open their eyes and to call for conversion. They locked themselves out of the Kingdom of God and prevented others from entering it.

The pride and false security of the religious leaders infuriated Jesus and he listed their inequities. They who concentrated on the letter of the law failed to practice the essence of the divine law such as justice, mercy and fidelity. They observed the rituals only to be seen as holy in the public eye. They assumed that God will not see the greed and hypocrisy that filled their heart. Jesus severely criticized their hypocrisy and stated that it was equal to denying God and this was the main cause of disaster in Israel.

This devious relationship with God was the root cause of social injustice that became evident in various aspects of human life. They rejected God and worshiped some deity they formed in their imagination. Greed corrupted society and multiplied the number of the poor in the society. Their conscience had become so dull that they could live in luxury and ignore the “Lazarus” who was starving at their door step. Jesus uttered strong words against greed. Salvation could be attained only by distributing the accumulated wealth to the poor. Wealth is meant to be shared not to be worshiped as god. In short, a radical conversion of heart was essential for salvation.

12. PROPHET OF HOPE

The main theme of the teaching of Jesus was not the inevitable punishment that would fall upon the sinful society. Even the warning of disaster was part of another plan, the announcement of the good news that God's unconditional love is available for all. All that Jesus taught and did centered on this theme. The warning of disaster was to help the people who turned away from God to realize their condition and to come back and accept God's love. The words and deeds of Jesus depicted this endless mercy and unconditional love of God the Father. This was the essence of the Kingdom of God.

The Evangelists summarized the teaching of Jesus in one word, "Kingdom of God". Mark presented, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1, 15), as a summary of the Gospel and also as a policy statement of Jesus. It denoted that a new age of hope has started. The expectation Israel preserved for centuries and the prophecies of the prophets were fulfilled in Jesus and this Good News was depicted in his words and deeds.

The term "Kingdom of God" did not refer to any particular place or structure, though the word kingdom might give the impression of a place. Neither did it mean a re-establishment of the kingdom of David nor the political liberation of Israel from the dominion of Rome. It did not concentrate on the re-structuring of the existing system though a radical change was envisaged by the establishment of the Kingdom of God. It simply meant that God's rule would come on earth and that would change the entire situation for all the people.

The Kingdom of God could be understood, to a certain extent, through the words of the Prophet Isaiah. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns” (Is 52,7). The bearer of “good tidings” is the soldier who rushes home announcing the king’s victory over the enemies. “O Zion, herald of good tidings, lift up your voice with strength. Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him” (Is 40, 9-10). This was uttered by the prophet Deutero Isaiah, visualizing the picture of the people of Israel returning to Jerusalem, after God liberated them from the slavery in Babylon. No more will Israel be subjected to slavery under the gentiles. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (Is 40,2). When God’s rule becomes a reality, there will be no slavery of any kind.

The vision of Isaiah was fulfilled in Jesus but he was not announcing just a political liberation, as many expected and wanted, but total liberation from all the forces that oppressed humanity. God defeated all the forces that enslaved humanity and it marked the beginning of a new age, a new beginning, the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. It would bring about a destruction of the oppressing religious structure that existed in the name of God. Structures often have the tendency to forget God and enslave people because they were created by man. The Kingdom of God, Jesus envisaged was above all structures and social set up, rooted in the unconditional love and endless mercy of God. The outpouring of this love was evident in the words and deeds of Jesus. They gave hope to the poor and liberation to the oppressed. This was not something man could buy by offering praises and sacrifices. This was not favors

granted by God in return for the prayers and sacrifices offered to Him. It was a gratuitous gift of God to broken humanity.

The words and deeds of Jesus assured each and every one that God is the Father of all the people, regardless of cast, creed and social status. The entire being of Jesus was dedicated to communicate this tender love of the Father. “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk 6, 20). From the human point of view, there is nothing lovable or attractive in the poor but Jesus assures God’s love to the poor.

The poor are aware that they are not in a position to demand for any rights. They feel rejected by all and drained of all human dignity. All the same, God loves them and this is what Jesus communicated by assuring them that God’s love is not based on any merit of the individual but unconditional love that is everlasting. Proclaiming this good news was the mission of Jesus who said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Lk 4, 18). In short, the Good News of the Kingdom of God offered liberation for all.

Rejection is one of the cruelest things human beings inflict on each other. Being rejected could drain all the energy from the person and it could be caused by many things such as sin, sickness, poverty, low social status etc. The Pharisees pretended that God approved of the discrimination they exercised and that they were better than the others and claimed that they were closer to God. On the other hand the poor felt that they were rejected by all and even by God, because the so called “holy” people made them feel that they were cursed by God. The Gospels present the picture of Jesus walking into the midst of this misery of the poor to restore their human dignity and personal value.

Lepers had a pathetic existence as they were cast out of society and were destined to live in isolation in the colonies set aside for them away from the cities and villages, accepting humiliation and rejection from all. They saw the signs of God's curse in their wounds. Fed up with his misery in the Leper colony, a man escaped and approached Jesus. Though he was afraid of the public, he trusted that Jesus would not reject him and the response of Jesus went beyond all his expectations. "A leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean" (Mk 1, 40-42) With that, he started a new life. No more had he to avoid the public as he received not only physical healing but also a spiritual healing that restored his dignity and elevated his social status. To make the healing legal, Jesus sent him to show himself to the priest and to get a certificate of curing. By touching the untouchable leper, Jesus was revealing the merciful face of God and proclaiming that no illness was a sign of God's curse. For the people in the valley of desperation, Jesus became a sign of hope, healing the sick and proclaiming the Kingdom of God into which all could enter.

A fundamental truth, hope for the humanity, was revealed through the life, teaching, activities, death and resurrection of Jesus. An attempt is being made here to respond to some basic questions such as what was the hope Jesus provided, what was the nature of that hope and how was this made available to humanity. The hope Jesus provided was rooted in the Old Testament. The Good News he communicated was the fulfillment of the promises God made to the forefathers. A look into the history of salvation revealed through the Old Testament will be followed by an analysis of the life style, preaching, teaching, activities, death and resurrection of Jesus in order to arrive at certain conclusions.

1. Hope Rooted in Promises

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord... Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4, 18-21).

This is the sum total of the hope Jesus gave. It was not only a part of the prophecies of Isaiah (61, 1-2) but also a sum total of all the promises given in the Old Testament that were fulfilled in Jesus. The Gospels present Jesus as the fulfillment of promises, expectations and hopes presented in the Old Testament.

Genesis 3, 15 presents the first promise God gave to man who was alienated from God and fellow human beings as well as to the universe that threw him into loneliness and depression. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen 3, 15).

Through this promise, God gave hope to man who had come under the dominion of evil. At the end of the flood, God repeated this promise to the entire universe (Gen 9, 1-17). The primitive history began drawing the picture of alienated humanity that was separated by conflict and sin and that era came to an end with Abraham, son of Terah who was to become the Father of faith.

God called Abraham to leave his father’s house and property and to go into the Land God would show him. In return, God said to him, “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations... And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you... for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God” (Gen 13, 14-17, 15, 4-5. 17-21; 17, 4-8; 22, 16-18). The promise given to Abraham became the heritage of Israel. God repeated these

promises to Isaac and Jacob and later to the elders of the Tribes. Thus, the Lord became the Lord of the promises and Israel became the heir of the promises.

In the course of time, these chosen people, away from the Promised Land, ended up becoming slaves. They were subjected to extreme hardship and total exploitation. In utter misery, they cried out to the Lord and the Lord heard their cry and came down as the liberator of the oppressed slaves (Ex 1-2). To lead the heirs of the promise to the Promised Land, to wipe away their tears, the Lord who is faithful to his promises revealed himself to them. The people who were about to be eliminated experienced the mighty power of the Lord. They saw His fidelity. The enslaved people became free and the chosen people of God. With renewed hope, they crossed the Red Sea. Those who went after them with a great army perished in the sea. The people travelled through the desert and settled in the Promised Land. At every stage of Salvation History, God repeated His promises and kept alive the hope of the people. The promises were sealed with a Covenant. The Covenant on Mount Sinai (Ex 19), and the promise to King David (1 Sam 7) was only a repetition and explanation of those promises.

When the slaves became masters, they forgot the past and became prey to temptations. God sent prophets to preach the message of repentance and conversion and when they refused to listen to the prophets and obey the precepts of the covenant, they were cast out of the Promised Land. Again they were subjected to bitter slavery. However, God did not abandon them to desperation. Failures in the wars and the Babylonian exile were only actions of discipline to bring them back to the circle of God's love. God sent prophets with the message of hope to the people who were on the verge of despair, thinking that even God had forsaken them. The prophets depicted the coming of the Kingdom of God but it was not a re-establishment of the kingdom of David or Solomon.

The prophets taught about a new Kingdom and new structures created by deep repentance and change of heart. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke of the Covenant inscribed in the hearts of the people (Jer 31, 29-32; Ez 36, 22-32). They knew the sinful nature of the people and their inability to change and to become a people of God and so the Lord himself will have to enter into their sinful state and subject them to a total purification. Here promises began to take new horizons.

The expectation of the people of God was focused mainly on material prosperity and earthly peace. They expected that the promises of God will be materialized by the re-establishment of the kingdom of David, a lot of riches, good health and long life, fortified by many children and peace in the land (Lv 26; Dt 28; Is 35). In time these hopes began to include spiritual renewal based on purification from sins and expectation of a life beyond death. Eventually they got deeper insight into the renewal of man and even more, the spiritual renewal of the entire universe. Prophets gave way to mystics and wise men and apocalypse. They began to expect a new Heaven and a New Earth created by God Himself. All these were based on God's promises (Is 65, 17; Dn 7, 12; Wis 3, 1-9; 4, 7-14; 2 Mic 7).

Though new hopes and ideas emerged, the old concepts remained alive. By the advent of the New Testament era, the people began to have diverse expectations. Even those who subscribed to the forgiveness of sins and the creation of a New Heaven and New Earth, awaited the re-establishment of the kingdom of David and all the material prosperity such as health, wealth and long life. All the same, the realities of daily events did not support such hopes. Those who dreamed of freedom had to live under the dominion of the Roman Empire. The majority of the people lived in utter poverty and misery. Poverty and sickness were considered as signs of sin and so God's curse. All longed for an end to their suffering. All expected a Savior who will bring about political freedom, healing the sick and forgiveness of sins.

He will be a prophet who will teach them the law of the Lord and help humanity to attain total liberation. Into the midst of this chaotic situation Jesus walked in as the fulfillment of their hopes, as an eschatological prophet who gives them new hope and as the Son of God who renews everything.

2. Miracles – Rays of Hope

The Gospels that depict the life, teaching and activities of Jesus, gave much importance to the miracles he performed because thousands of people were attracted to him through those miracles. Jesus did not perform miracles to attract people but to show them the mercy of God, to give hope to the hopeless. He felt compassion for the people who were suffering with debilitating illness. He touched them and healed them and thus communicated the unending love and mercy of God who loved them all. The dignity of the person was restored through the healing. The miracles Jesus performed can be divided into four groups: a. Healing the sick; b. Exorcism; c. Dominion over nature; d. Raising the dead.

a. Healing the Sick

Most of the miracles Jesus performed were healing of the sick. Illness makes a person weak, drains of all energy and leads to death. At a time when medical science had not developed much, there were distorted views of illness and their cures (Jn 9,3). They considered most of the mental illness such as hysteria, epilepsy etc., physical deformities such as deformed body (Lk 13,1), deafness (Lk 11, 14) and dumbness and even physical illness such as fever (Lk 4, 38-39), as result of demonic possession. Many illnesses such as leprosy, paralysis, blindness etc. were considered as God's curse.

This distorted view of illnesses made society look down upon those who were affected by any kind of sickness. Any kind of physical deformity would make a person impure and such people were denied entry into the Temple. Lepers were

forbidden to enter the city as well as to walk through the public road. This degrading attitude that existed in society debilitated the sick physically as well as mentally. They felt rejected by all including God. All those who were sick felt that they were destined to carry the burden of sin, committed knowingly or unknowingly by them or by their ancestors. They had no hope of liberation from their miserable condition. The common understanding was that if they saw a leper, he or she should be chased away by throwing stones at them. A woman who suffers from hemorrhage had to stay in the house because the people, place and things she touches would become impure. The place she sits and things she uses were considered as impure. If she goes out, she would make others impure. The way Jesus viewed the sick and sickness was quite different.

Jesus did not consider the sick as impure or as someone with whom he must avoid contacts. Through Jesus, the sick experienced the merciful love of God. He touched the eyes of the blind, ears of the deaf and tongue of the dumb and healed them. Though the lepers were forbidden to come out into the public places, they dared to approach Jesus who touched and healed them. By doing so, Jesus demonstrated a new approach to the sick and sickness (Jn 9, 3). Overpowering guilt feelings weighed heavily on sinners. By forgiving sins, Jesus uplifted their spirit and restored their dignity (Mk 2, 5-12). By his touch, the woman who was bent over was made straight and she stood up and praised God (Lk 13, 13). Hearing the command of Jesus, the man who was paralyzed for 38 years got up and walked away, carrying his beddings. The blind man who received sight became a witness (Jn 9, 17) and a disciple (Lk 18, 43) of Jesus. The dumb man who received the ability to speak, praised God.

Through healing Jesus restored the body and mind of the sick. By initiating a change of attitude towards the sick and sickness, rays of hope entered into persons and society. The woman with the hemorrhage was healed by touching the fringe

of Jesus cloak. Though she wished to remain unknown, fearing the people, Jesus exposed and praised her faith and she went away in peace (Mk 5, 34). Jesus explained illness not as a curse of God but an opportunity to reveal the compassionate face of God. The sick were objects of God's mercy and love. It was the Good News that shed rays of hope to broken humanity. Filled with compassion for the suffering, Jesus poured the healing power of God into the physically and spiritually broken people.

b. Exorcism

At the time of Jesus, people considered the devil as a frightening force that enter human beings and torture them. Hence there existed a great fear toward Satan and he was considered to be the cause of many of the illnesses. Exorcism of the evil spirits was presented as an important activity of Jesus, in the Synoptic Gospels. They were similar to the healing of the sick but a closer look would reveal that it was a deeper issue and carried a more serious message than healing of physical illness.

The first miracle recorded in the Gospel of St. Mark is an episode of exorcism (Mk 1, 21-26) that took place in a synagogue in Capernaum on a Sabbath day. The possessed man had come into the Synagogue to take part in the service. Jesus went into the Synagogue and began to teach and all were surprised that he taught with authority. Hearing Jesus, the possessed man shouted, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God. But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him" (Mk 1, 24-26). The possessed man had behaved normally until he heard the words of Jesus. Satan knew who Jesus was and why he had come into the world. No more could he remain calm as he knew that his dominion will soon be over. This points to the deep significance of Jesus' mission and teaching.

The question of Satan, “Have you come to destroy us?” reveals certain things about Satan and his work. Satan is a unified force that enslaved man and tormented him. It was not a physical or mental illness but a force that alienates man from himself and turns him away from God and his fellow human beings. Until Jesus confronted him, he could remain calm and pretend to be normal. But, upon seeing Jesus, he cried out. The same things had happened to the other possessed people. Satan is a formidable force, almost like the Roman Legion (Mk 5, 9) and rules over his kingdom. He claimed that he had conquered the whole world (Lk 4, 6). In order to prevent people from conversion and return to the Lord, he takes away the word of God from their hearts (Lk 8, 12). He is a destroyer (Jn 8, 44) who would even tempt the disciples and make them go astray (Lk 22, 31). In order to prevent the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth, he tried to tempt even Jesus (Mk 1, 13; Mt 16, 23).

The Gospels depict the exorcism of evil spirits as a confrontation between Jesus and the ruler of this world. The decisive war took place in the wilderness. Exorcism during the public life was an encroachment into the kingdom of Satan who had failed in the wilderness. Hence this provides a message of great hope. Though Satan would continue with his temptations, those who remain with Jesus will not have to fear his evil force because Jesus defeated him and his disciples were given power over all his forces (Lk 10, 19). It was for this that Jesus appointed the disciples (Mk 3, 15). With the power of God, Jesus exorcised Satan and it is a sign that the Kingdom of God has prevailed over the domain of Satan.

The episodes of exorcism presented in the Gospels need to be considered in the light of the nature of Satan described by the Evangelists. Satan is called by various names such as liar, false prophet, murderer, tempter, worldly force, power of darkness, one who distorts truth, deceiver, one who removes the word of God from the hearts of people, enemy of the Word, one who

demands to be worshiped as God etc. Knowing these attributes would help to discern the true enemy, reject him and avoid the possibility of being enslaved by him. Through exorcism, Jesus freed people from fear and enslavement. It is no longer Satan who is the ruler of the world but Jesus who defeated him and thus established the Kingdom of God on earth. This is a source of great hope.

c. Victory over the Powers of Nature

The destructive power of nature has been demonstrated through natural disasters that destroy human lives such as, Tsunami that swallowed thousands of lives in the sea, earthquakes that have wiped away even great cities from the face of the earth and Tornados that destroy vast areas of the land. All the efforts of man and his inventions have proved to be powerless to assist man in protecting himself and his property when such natural disasters strike the land. Man's fear of natural forces continues to exist and even increases when some people who claim to have special vision predicts the end of the world in the near future. In such situations, the power Jesus demonstrated over nature becomes more relevant. Galilee is a comparatively small lake but the storms in it are frightening as they could be life threatening. Jesus told the disciples who were about to perish in the storm, not to be afraid and then calmed the storm. The disciples were surprised and said to each other, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" (Mk 4, 41). They realized that they did not have to fear any natural force when Jesus was with them because the word of the one who created the universe with a single word, is incarnated in Jesus. He still asks us, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith" (Mk 4, 40).

Jesus refused the suggestion of the tempter to turn stone into bread to satisfy his hunger but he did not hesitate to multiply bread to satisfy the hunger of the people because he felt compassion for them (Mk 8, 2-3). After teaching the disciples

the need for sharing, Jesus multiplied the few pieces of bread they had, to feed the multitude. He still lives in our midst as food for the hungry. Even when he taught us not to become slaves to bread, he gave himself as food for us with the invitation, “Take and eat, this is my body broken for you”. Turning water into wine and multiplying bread were examples of Jesus’ power over nature. At the same time they are also signs of the new life Jesus provides.

d. Power over Death

All the hopes and expectations, victories and inventions collapse with the reality of the inevitable death. Death still stands as an obstacle that cannot be overcome, and an enemy that cannot be defeated. To this day man has found no way to avoid death. It is the source of all the fears and the last enemy of hope. But defeating even this enemy, Jesus brought back to life three people who had died.

A little time after the death of the daughter of Jairus, Jesus restored her life. The only son of the widow of Nain was brought back to life as they were taking him to be buried. Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days when Jesus restored his life. Through these incidents, Jesus proved his power over death. Jesus stated that he is life and resurrection and those who believe in him will have eternal life. “Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (Jn 11, 21-25).

He who raises the dead is the Lord of life. Jesus defeated death by his own death and established life’s victory over death by rising on the third day. This is the source of hope for all humanity. By his life, death and resurrection Jesus manifested his authority over sickness, poverty, hunger, death, Satan and

nature. Those who believe in Jesus can face them all with courage and hope.

3. Good News – Tower of Light

The miracles of Jesus that gave health, food, light and life were signs. They reveal that God has entered human history, into the life of men who were drowning in despair and groping in the dark. They were the manifestations of God's love and so hope for humanity. The teachings of Jesus clarified the meaning of this hope. The miracles Jesus performed should be seen in the light of his teaching if we are to understand their true meaning and depth.

a. Fulfillment of Promises

Jesus started his public life with the proclamation, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1, 15). It marked the fulfillment of not only the promises given to the forefathers, as depicted in the Old Testament, but also the hopes and expectations of humanity. The entire world had been awaiting the arrival of one who will bring them total liberation and fulfill all the expectations. The different cultures called him in different names such as savior, divine teacher, liberator etc. St. Mathew who presented Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecies emphasizes this truth. St. Luke depicted the birth of Jesus as a ray of hope for all the people in the world. "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people" (Lk 2, 10). The words and deeds of Jesus manifested this good news.

The content of the Gospels can be summarized into one phrase, "Kingdom of God". Ousting Satan who had established dominion over man, God established his rule on earth. Sickness, hunger, exploitation, enslavement and death were the marks of the rule of Satan. Replacing them with fraternal love and eternal life, the Kingdom of God came into existence. To those who prayed to lead them from darkness to light, Jesus responded, "I am the light of the world" (Jn 8, 12; 9, 5). "I am the resurrection

and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (Jn 11, 25) and “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14, 6) are the response to the age old prayer to lead from death to life. In the fourth Gospel the concept of the “Kingdom of God” was replaced by Life, Light, Truth etc. The teaching of Jesus on the Kingdom of God emphasized that God is the Lord of the universe and that He is the one who leads history. Jesus proclaimed that God’s promises given through the prophets over the ages have been fulfilled with his arrival.

One of the promises Abraham received was a land of his own. People thought that this promise was fulfilled when the people of Israel entered Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. But, later the prophets revealed that the real Promised Land is beyond Canaan. It is the rule God establishes in the hearts of men and in society. What was fulfilled in Jesus was not the kingdom of David but the Kingdom of God, a kingdom that has no boundaries or limits. It is a kingdom of love that encompasses all the people in the world. The promise, “through you all the people will be blessed” was fulfilled in the descendant of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

b. Values of the Kingdom of God

The rule of God becomes a reality through the values instilled in the society and in the hearts of human beings. The main values of the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed were love, freedom, justice etc.

God is the Loving Father

The concept of God, during the Old Testament times, was that of a judge who keenly observes the sins and faults of human beings and strictly passes judgment on them. No matter how much he tried, man could not live without faults and sins and so he was living in despair and intense fear of God. Hence he tried to placate God through sacrifices and offerings. In many ways, the Old Testament history supported such a concept.

The words and deeds of Jesus presented a different picture of God. Jesus presented God not as a judge, eager to punish the sinner but as a loving father who awaits the return of the sinner. To demonstrate this Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son who left home with his share but the father hoped and waited for his return. When he returned after wasting all the money, the father celebrated his return, without asking for any explanation but preparing a great banquet (Lk 15, 11-12). God is the father who lavishes love upon the children, no matter what they have done and who they are. This gave hope to all.

God is not a deity who merely enjoys the offering received and cares not for the person and his/her pain. He is not a boss who enslaves people and demands his service. He is a loving father who knows the needs of the people, even before they are verbalized, and grants them all that is needed (Lk 12, 22-30). There is no limit to his love, no conditions for his forgiveness. Where God rules, all are brothers and sisters and will have food for the hungry, healing for the sick and forgiveness for the sinners. The Father desires only the best for his children.

No one is a stranger in His house. Jesus' words and deeds reveal the caring love and providence of the Father. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love" (Jn 15, 9). There was no limit to this love: "Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15, 13). "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3, 16). It is a consoling love and Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11, 28).

Fraternity

If God is the Father, all the people in the world are his children and so brothers and sisters. Jesus, by his teaching and life style demolished all the walls of discrimination based on cast, creed and color. The majority of the people were cast out

of society based on their birth, sex, work, physical condition or economic status. Jesus walked into their midst, embraced the leper, shared table fellowship with the tax collectors, and accepted the love and service of the public sinner (Lk 7, 36-50). He did not hesitate to associate with the Samaritans who were considered as social outcasts, to ask for a drink from a Samaritan woman and engage in a conversation with her in a public place (Jn 4, 6). Inviting a tax collector to become a disciple, Jesus demonstrated friendship without boundary. Instead of racial or religious prejudice, he practiced universal friendship.

At the time of Jesus, a Jewish woman was given only the position of a gentile slave. They had no rights and were forbidden to enter the Synagogue, to talk with a man in public, to submit a petition in the court or to be a witness in a trial. Widowhood and sterility were due to women's own fault. The woman was a visible sign of a society without hope. Jesus' approach to women opened a new chapter in the history of humanity. He spoke with them in public, accepted the tears of repentance and loving kisses of a public sinner, the bent woman who stood outside was called inside and healed and he accepted many women as his followers and friends.

Another visible sign of universal fraternity Jesus practiced was the table fellowship he shared with the out-castes. He denounced no invitation. He went to the house of Pharisees as well as tax collectors. The society rejected many as sinners and tax collectors but they often shared meals with Jesus. Being with Jesus gave hope and dignity to those who were lost in the valley of despair. He associated with them so frequently that he was called a friend of sinners and tax collectors (Lk 7, 34). Jesus fostered a bond of friendship with all kinds of people by sharing table fellowship with them. It was a pre-figuration of his own breaking and sharing at the Last Supper. Jesus desired that his disciples must continue this table sharing as a sign of his presence in their midst even when he was physically taken

away from them. It was for this that Jesus, at the Last Supper, asked the disciples to do it in his memory and sealed the New Covenant with his own blood. The Roman Centurion and tax collector as well as the Pharisee became his friends and the Kingdom of God became universal brotherhood.

It was to continue this universal communion on earth that Jesus constituted his disciples as a Church and instructed them to invite all the people to enter into that fellowship. The Pharisee and the sinner, the rich and the poor, the Jew and the gentile must gather around the same table of banquet. Christ's Church is universal, that is to say it is open to all. In this Church, the authority has the right and responsibility to serve (Lk 22, 25-27). The fellowship Jesus shared and the life style he followed was such that it lifted up the spirit of those who were lost in inferiority complex and restored in them the dignity of the children of God. Eucharistic celebrations must lead to table fellowship that foster this hope and strengthen universal brotherhood.

Freedom

The laws, social set up and religious structure that existed during the time of Jesus, were such that they pushed people into fear and an inferiority complex. The Old Testament laws were given to abolish slavery and to ensure freedom. But, in the course of time the laws multiplied into 613 and numerous sub laws and explanations were added to it. Thus, laws became an unbearable burden for the people. Common people could never learn all of them, let alone obey them. Breaking the law was a sin and the sinner will be punished by God. Hence the people lived in constant fear. Added to the religious laws was the fear of the natural forces. Jesus through his teaching and activities eliminated these fears that drained man of all energy and life. He taught that laws were intended to make man truly free rather than force him into slavery. By eating without ritual washing, healing

on Sabbath and touching the impure, Jesus demonstrated the futility of the Pharisaic interpretation of laws. By doing so, he lifted the burden of the law and the fear of breaking them from the shoulders of the people.

Jesus' teaching provided liberation from fear. But, an even greater liberation was achieved by the forgiveness of sins. Only God can forgive sins and by forgiving sins, Jesus revealed the depth and width of true freedom. Being forgiven, people were liberated from the feelings of guilt, and they entered into the freedom of the children of God. The Kingdom of God is a communion of the children of God and here there is no place for fear.

Justice

According to the teaching of the Pharisees, one could attain justice by obeying the laws. They taught that God blesses the just and punishes the sinners. Health, wealth and long life were considered to be signs of God's blessing while poverty and sickness were considered as punishment given by God. But all these concepts were shattered by the teaching of Jesus. "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God... But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation..." "Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets" (Lk 6, 20-26). These words of Jesus depict the nature of the Kingdom of God and gives hope to the poor. Jesus declared that no one is justified by the literal observation of the laws as taught by the Pharisees. Just as health and wealth are not signs of the just, poverty and sickness are not the signs of sinners or of God's curse.

God who is just will forgive the sins of the repentant sinner and justify him. Jesus put forward certain conditions for the rich to be justified. Their justice must go beyond that of the Pharisees. They must share their wealth with the poor; "Lazar" (the symbol of the poor) must have a place at the table of the "rich man"; the foolish rich must open the door of their storage to the poor;

all those who are wounded, regardless of cast and creed, should be nursed back to health; all those who are in need, the poor, the sick, the homeless, the imprisoned etc. should be cared for, seeing the distorted face of Christ in them. The Kingdom of God is a communion of those who share everything in common.

c. Growth of the Kingdom of God

Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God without the support of any institution or worldly power. Outwardly, it is vulnerable, like a seed that falls on the earth and dies. But the life inside the seed will come out, breaking the hard shell with its soft and gentle power. No one might notice its tender leaves but slowly the plant will grow so that the birds of the air can build nests on its branches and the people can gather under its shade. The parables regarding the Kingdom of God expressed Jesus' expectations: the small mustard seed grows into a big plant; though much of the seeds were lost on the wayside, among the thorns and rocks, some seeds would fall on the good soil and produce hundred-fold fruit; as a little yeast can ferment the whole flour in the pot, the efforts of a small band of disciples can spread the Kingdom of God all through the world. The ministry started by the Carpenter from Nazareth with a few fishermen of Galilee would turn the world into the Kingdom of God. It will grow in spite of oppositions from within and without as in the parable of the seed. Birds may pick on them; weeds may crush them; but it will survive all these adversities. Nothing can prevent the growth of the Kingdom of God.

With the coming of Jesus, the Kingdom of God was inaugurated in this world. All the forces of Satan cannot stifle its growth because it is God Himself who initiated the Kingdom and nurtures its growth. Hence no one who believes need to fear or despair because Jesus has said, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms" (Lk 12, 32-33). Faith must lead to action and activities inspired by faith will strengthen hope.

4. Death and Resurrection – The Foundation of Hope

From the human point of view the life of Jesus and the Kingdom of God he established were an utter failure. In the beginning thousands followed him, attracted by his teaching and surprised by the miracles. As time went on the teaching became difficult to accept and Jesus stopped performing miracles. Opposition from the authorities became sharper. The common people distanced themselves from Jesus and some of the disciples became disillusioned and some left him.

At the decisive moment all left Jesus. One of the beloved disciples betrayed him; the head of the disciples renounced him and all the other disciples ran away. The Roman soldiers and temple guards joined hands to arrest him. The Roman Governor, the High Priest and the king of Galilee subjected him to trial and condemned him to die on the Cross accusing him of blasphemy, political rebellion and causing disturbance in the land. People chose the zealot leader, Barabbas over Jesus. On the Passover, when thousands gathered in Jerusalem, Jesus walked through the street, carrying the Cross on which he was to be crucified. The public mocked him; the ones who crucified him challenged him to come down from the cross. Rejected and insulted by all, he hung on the cross between heaven and earth. He lifted his eyes to heaven and cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”. The gates of heaven did not open, the Father did not come down, and not even a sound was heard from heaven. Suffering untold pain, Jesus breathed his last. His body was buried in a rented tomb. To make sure that he would not come out of it, the mouth of the tomb was sealed with a huge stone and the temple guards guarded the tomb. There is no failure greater than this! But that was not the end! It marked a new beginning.

The sealed tomb opened. The guards could not stop him. At the spot where evil celebrated its victory, started the victory of Good. Life won over death. The one who was crucified

resurrected. The empty tomb proclaimed that death does not have the final word. The Resurrection of Jesus demonstrated that the ruler of the world is God and not Satan, who pretended to be the ruler of the world, was defeated forever. The Kingdom of God cannot be eliminated by Satan or any worldly power.

It was not an accident that Jesus died on the Cross. From the beginning he knew that his life would lead to the Cross. Towards the second half of his public ministry, Jesus began to give clear warnings to his disciples that his life would encounter a bitter end and so he prepared them for accepting it but it was beyond their comprehension.

“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Mt 16, 21). All three synoptic Gospels recorded three clear predictions Jesus made about his passion and death. Besides that, he had often hinted about his upcoming death. Whenever, Jesus spoke of death, he spoke of resurrection also.

He assured them that the destroyed temple will be restored in three days. Jesus was talking about the temple that was his body (Jn 2, 19-21). “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit” (Jn 12, 24). In order to produce new life, the seed has to die. In the same way to grant eternal life to those who believe in Jesus, he has to die on the Cross. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn 3, 14-15). In the Gospel of John, being lifted up on the Cross is the symbol of death and resurrection (Jn 12, 32; 11, 52). Death and resurrection are two sides of the same coin. There is no resurrection without death and death is meaningless without resurrection.

Death on the cross was not something forced upon Jesus or an inevitable accident in the history of humanity. For an outside

observer it might appear to be forced upon Jesus. It was the fulfillment of the plan of God that gives salvation and hope to humanity. Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 are examples of prophecies that point to the Christ event. On the part of Jesus, death on the cross was a loving sacrifice offered to the Father for the salvation of humanity. Jesus has said, "Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15, 13). "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10, 11). "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father" (Jn 10, 18). Resurrection was the response of the Father for the loving sacrifice in total freedom. It was the sign that the sacrifice was accepted. Jesus offered himself so that all will receive eternal life. Eternal life was made available to all through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The shadow of the Cross was evident in the life-style, decisions, activities and teaching of Jesus. When he rejected the easy methods suggested by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus was accepting the way of the Cross. From Bethlehem to Calvary, he lived as a homeless poor man and this was part of the way he chose. In this path, he joined the poor, the rejected and the marginalized in society. Even in the miracles he performed there was the shadow of the cross. The power poured out from him, giving healing to others (Lk 6, 19; 8, 46). The heel of the one who crushes the head of the serpent will be bruised (Gen 3, 15). He was wounded for us, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Mt 8, 17).

It is the one who was wounded that healed. It is the one who died that won victory over death. The "Lord of life" is the one who first walked through the narrow road that leads to life (Mt 7, 13-14). He who came to cast fire upon the earth (Lk 12, 49) offered himself to be consumed first. Jesus won victory over death not by keeping distance from death and suffering but accepting them. Through such a death he opened the path to Life.

13. JESUS - THE HIGH PRIEST

All through the world, in all the Catholic Churches, there are daily Eucharistic celebrations. Millions of Catholics take part in the Mass, the reenactment of the holocaust Jesus offered on Mount Calvary. The priest who celebrates the Mass stands in the place of Jesus Christ. The Catholic Church views the priests as persons ordained to officiate at the sacrifice. The Church always saw the crucifixion as a sacrifice and never questioned His priesthood.

Priesthood of Jesus

In the Old Testament only men born in the tribe of Levi were allowed to become priests. Jesus was not born in the house of Levi and could not become a priest according to the Law of Moses. The Gospel account shows that during the life time of Jesus, He was called as Rabbi, Prophet, Son of David, Son of man, Son of God etc. In the light of the Resurrection, to reveal the personality of Jesus, the disciples called him Savior, Lord etc. But, no one ever called him priest, before or after his death. St. John who tried to dive deep into the personality of Jesus, called him “the Word become flesh”. St. Paul who encountered the resurrected Jesus, saw Him as Lord, Savior, and the Son of God. He never used the term priest, in his epistles, to refer to Jesus. The same question arises about his death also. The religious leaders and Roman political authority condemned Jesus to die on the cross as a criminal. How can a criminal’s death become a Sacrifice?

The Catholics, who always saw Jesus’ death on the cross as a sacrifice, will have a difficulty to see it otherwise. But, only if one

examines the concept of sacrifice that existed during the time of Jesus, can one understand the gravity of the matter. Sacrifices could be performed only by the priests who were chosen and anointed for this very purpose and that also in the place designated for it - on the altar in the Temple. Objects of sacrifice could be animals or food items. According to these regulations, Jesus was not a priest and death on the cross was not a sacrifice. That may be the reason why the New Testament authors did not use the term “priest” to unveil the personality of Jesus.

However, one of the books of the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews is an exception to this. A New Testament scholar, Albert Vatcha, wrote, with an apparent sense of humor, that St. Paul’s letter to the Hebrews was neither written by Paul, nor was it written for the Hebrews. It was a sermon written, sometime around 70 A.D. by an unknown disciple of Jesus regarding the priesthood of Jesus. Though most of the Bible scholars agree with this opinion, it is difficult to change the traditional name of the book and so it will continue to be known as the letter to the Hebrews. It is a comprehensive study on the priesthood of Jesus. It presents Jesus as the High Priest. However, this priesthood is totally different from the priesthood that existed during the Old Testament period. Being aware of this, the author has taken great care to describe the special characteristics of the priesthood of Jesus.

Though the other New Testament authors did not use the term “priest”, there are points that would later support the use of the term priest to Jesus. This is more evident in the parts that depict the death of Jesus. The statement by Jesus, “For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10, 45) could be seen as the beginning of depicting the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for the remission of sins. Though the word sacrifice is not used, “ransom” should be understood in the background of sacrifice.

Another statement that refers to the salvific aspect of Jesus' death is: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3, 16). The statement, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father" (Jn 10, 17-18), depicts Jesus' death as a free offering to the Father. The parable of the Good Shepherd shows that Jesus was offering his life for his sheep. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10, 11). The priestly prayer of Jesus presents the death of Jesus as the purification of the disciples, as a total offering to God. "For their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth" (Jn 17, 19). This also paved the way to depict Jesus' death on the cross as a sacrifice.

There are many points that help to see Jesus' death as sacrifice in the letters of St. Paul. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2, 20). Jesus' total offering to the Father inspired by love hints that it was a sacrifice that granted forgiveness of sins to humanity and reconciliation with the Father that opened the door of heaven to all. Though the terminology of priest is not used to refer to Jesus, in reality Jesus is a priest. "Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?" (Rom 8, 34). When St. Paul asserted that, "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (I Cor 15, 3; Rom 5,6-8), he did mean that Jesus offered himself as atonement (Sacrifice) for our sins. The killed Lamb that stood before the heavenly throne signified Jesus, the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn 1, 28). Thus, without using the terms, "Priest" and "Sacrifice" the idea of

these concepts appear in many places in the New Testament. However, the priesthood of Christ was totally different from that of the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament. Taking into consideration these differences, the letter to the Hebrews presented Jesus as the High Priest.

Insufficiency of Levitical Priesthood

Priesthood and sacrifice came into existence in the Old Testament to open the way for sinful man, through forgiveness of sins, to appear in the presence of God who is holy. The letter to the Hebrews concentrated on the sacrifice offered by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, rather than the numerous daily sacrifices offered in the Temple. The common belief was that the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifice in reparation for the sins of all the people. But, the sacred author found this insufficient in many ways. The very fact that it was offered every year, demonstrated that it did not absolve sins. If the sins were remitted completely there would be no need to repeat the sacrifice. Besides, since the High Priest who offered the sacrifice was himself a sinner, he entered only into a Temple built by human hands, not into the presence of God. Hence the Old Testament sacrifices were only symbols incapable of absolving and reconciling humanity with God.

The priesthood inherited through birth in the tribe of Levi is not capable of bringing about reconciliation with God and so it must give way to another type of priesthood. The author of the letter to the Hebrews discussed this matter in the light of the Psalms and made use of the insights received from them. The priesthood of the Old Testament was only a symbol of the perfect priesthood that was to come. The concept of priesthood attained its fullness and achieved its goal in Jesus the High Priest.

In the Order of Melchizedek

“You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps 110, 4). This was an oath by the Lord. Combining this

statement with the proclamation, “You are my son, today I have begotten you” (Ps 2, 7), the sacred author explained the priesthood of Jesus. Melchizedek was one of the persons among the number of people who came to receive Abraham when he returned after defeating the kings and rescuing Lot and his family. “Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High” (Gen 14, 18). There is no record of the genealogy or death of Melchizedek and so he stands as one who has no beginning or end. Hence, he is the priest of God and symbol of God’s son.

By accepting gifts from Abraham and blessing him, Melchizedek was depicted as one who was greater than Abraham. Thus, the author of the letter to the Hebrews demonstrated that Levi and the Levitical priests who descended from Abraham were in a lower position than Melchizedek and the priesthood of Melchizedek is far superior to the Levitical priesthood. This order of Melchizedek helped to emphasize the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus.

The meaning of the word, “Melchizedek” is “King of Justice” and so it indicates that the mission of the priest is to re-establish justice. “Shalom” which means “Peace” is the name of the kingdom of Melchizedek and it indicates that the priest is responsible for creating peace by the establishment of justice. Thus, the author proved that Melchizedek is the king of justice and peace. By emphasizing the prophetic teaching that peace is brought about by justice, the author aims at something more than establishing that the priesthood of Melchizedek is greater than the priesthood of Levi.

The Bible teaches that the root cause of injustice and disturbances existing among men is that they distanced themselves from God. The story of Adam and Cain proves this. Only reconciliation with God will bring about peace. Without justice, peace cannot be maintained. Justice means accepting the Truth and executing the will of God on earth. According

to the letter to the Hebrews, this reality, signified by the name Melchizedek, was fulfilled in Jesus. The sacrifices of atonement in the Old Testament failed to bring about this reconciliation. But, Jesus accomplished this reconciliation with God through his self-sacrifice on the Cross, surrendering totally to the Will of God. “When Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God,’ as it is written of me in the roll of the book.” When he said above, “Thou hast neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), then he added, “Lo, I have come to do thy will” (Heb 10, 5-9).

Priest – Mediator

The priest is the mediator between God and man, and makes offerings for the atonement of the sins of humanity and grants him absolution. Hence, he should be acceptable to both God and man. To become acceptable to God, the priest has to be holy and, at the same time, he should be one who experiences the weakness and pain of human beings. The Levitical priest was only a human being and so a sinner, just like any other human being. Though he was especially chosen and consecrated to offer sin-offering for man, he could not take part in the holiness of God. He could not therefore bridge the immeasurable gap between the Holy God and sinful humanity. That is why God sent His only son into the world. As Son of God, He shared the holiness of God and by incarnation He shared in the plight of humanity. Hence He was able to bring about reconciliation between God and man.

As long as the Son of God remained in his divine nature only, he could not mediate for sinful humanity. Only standing in the midst of humanity, which bore the burden of sin, could

he fulfill the mediating function. Hence, the incarnation of the son of God became necessary. St. Paul speaks about the son of God, Jesus, who emptied himself and put on human nature. The Son “Emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil 2, 7). However, Jesus put on a human nature that was free of sin. In the place of the first man who rebelled against God and tried to claim equality with Him, Jesus emptied himself and surrendered his will to the will of God and thus obtained remission for the sins of humanity.

The self-emptying process of Jesus continued until the point of death. “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Heb 5, 7-9). Jesus who offered himself to the Father became the object of sacrifice and at the same time the one who offered the sacrifice. What Jesus offered was not the blood of some animal but his own blood, in other words, his own life because blood symbolizes life. According to the Bible, killing the animal and sprinkling its blood on the altar signified that they were professing God as the author of life. However, the priests of the Old Testament did not or could not offer themselves or achieve reconciliation with God. But, Jesus, offering his life, freed humanity from the slavery of sin and so became a mediator who made reconciliation possible between God and humanity. He accomplished this through self-emptying. As Son of God, Jesus was acceptable to God and as a man he represented humanity. Thus, Jesus was the real High Priest who became a mediator between God and man.

With the blood of the animal, the Levitical priest entered the holy of holies that was the symbol of God’s presence. But, Jesus offering himself entered into the very presence of God. Hence, “We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the

right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb 8, 1). Man can approach God, not with fear but with love and hope because Jesus, the mediator is present there. Through this reconciliation with God, Jesus has opened the way for man to attain true justice and peace.

Merciful Priest

To make atonement for the sins of humanity, Jesus became man in every way except sin. “Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For, because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted” (2, 17-18). The sufferings of man were not alien to him. He was rejected by his own people. “For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin is burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood” (Heb 13, 11-12). Jesus, the High Priest had suffered rejection, renunciation, betrayal and persecution (Heb 5, 7). He knew the pain of humanity that was separated from God as a result of sin. The Cross was the climax of all the suffering. From there, he cried out to God – in identification with suffering humanity and unity with all those who suffer. That is how Jesus became the High Priest. Man rejected him but God accepted him. The one who was condemned to a death on the Cross was enthroned with God. Through self-sacrifice, Jesus became a priest and God accepted that sacrifice and made his priesthood eternal.

The one who was persecuted is in communion with those who are persecuted. The one who was rejected accepts all those who suffer rejection. The one who has cried listens to the cry of others. The one who was crucified gives eternal life to all those who are suffering crucifixion. The High Priest, according to the

order of Melchizedek, king of Salem (Shalom), grants peace to all, through the re-establishment of justice. He brought about peace between man and God and between man and man.

Some Practical Reflections

All those who are baptized in Christ, share in the priesthood of Christ. This is even more true for persons who are ordained to be priests and set aside for the service of God and humanity. Though the letter to the Hebrews said nothing about the sharing of this priesthood, it is good to reflect on the demands, such priesthood makes on those who share it.

1. The Priest should be Holy

The consecrated are set aside for God and so his thoughts and actions should be directed toward fulfilling the will of God revealed through Jesus Christ. This holiness is not like the holiness of the Levitical priests who kept away from sinful people and refused to associate with anything or anybody who was considered legally impure. The priest of Christ, following the example of Jesus, must remain with the people and help them to experience the love and presence of God. He is to become the voice of God who calls each one son or daughter. In short, people must experience the love of God through the priests. His life style should be simple and he must resist the temptation to be led by materialism or the ways of the world. He must always remember that his life is consecrated to God.

2. Be a Person of Prayer

The priest is one who offers prayers of praise and supplication before God. Accepting the suffering of his people as his own, he pours out his heart to God and sheds tears for them. His participation in the priesthood of Christ should not be limited to the daily breaking of the bread but he has to continue to be broken for others, becoming one with the suffering people under his care. The Life of Jesus was an unceasing and loving

sacrifice offered to reconcile broken humanity with the loving God. His death on the Cross was the end and culmination of that continuous sacrifice. The cry from the Cross was the cry of all those who suffer oppression and persecution. As the representative of Christ, the priest also must do the same and his prayer must reflect the pain of the people and their needs. This cannot be accomplished by simply repeating prayers composed by someone else.

3. Be Merciful

Prayer becomes life oriented and liberating in the light of experience. The priest of Christ is not called to live in comfort, away from the people. The goal of priesthood attains its end by being in the midst of common people, sharing in their miseries, pains and suffering. They must not add more suffering to the burden of the people who are broken hearted by guilt feelings but lead them to the love of God and help them to find peace. Compassion should be shown to the poor, humble and those marginalized by society. However, being subservient before the rich and hiding the naked truth in order not to disturb the conscience of those who are in high position are not mercy.

4. Re-establish Justice

The one who accepted ordination to be a priest in the order of Melchizedek is obliged to re-establish justice. According to the Bible, “justice” goes beyond economical and social justice. It is a life according to the will of God. At the same time it does not ignore social and economic justice. Today, when the poor are denied justice in almost all circumstances, the priest has the responsibility not only to participate in the fight for justice but also to take leadership for the same. However, the struggle must be peaceful as Melchizedek is the king of Salem (Shalom). The activities of the priest should be such that it should bring about lasting peace in hearts and in society.

All these are applicable not only to the ordained priests but also for all Christians. For all are partakers of the priesthood of Christ though in different ways. All, leaders and followers, must join hands to become witnesses to the priesthood of Christ. “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12, 1). “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb 13, 15).

14. ABOVE ALL NAMES

When dealing with the personality of Jesus, the story about the four blind men who went to see the elephant comes to mind. They went and felt the elephant and each one described the way he perceived the animal. The first one said that it was like a pillar while the second one said it was like a broom and the third one said it was like a spear and the fourth one perceived it as a winnowing fan. They all were correct because the leg of the elephant is like a pillar, the tail like a broom, the horn like a spear and the ear like a winnowing fan. All those who have seen an elephant know that none of these describes an elephant and, even combining all of them together, one cannot get the true picture of an elephant.

Various people have presented the personality of Jesus in different ways and some of the narrations are even contradictory. Many of these explanations were recorded by those who have seen and heard him personally or heard eye witness accounts. Even the authors of the New Testament vary in their presentations. Inspired by what they heard from the disciples, the faithful added their contributions. But, none of them or all of them together, can provide a complete picture of Jesus. A humble attempt is made here to present a brief description of the personality of Jesus, combining the characteristics depicted in the New Testament, knowing that this will not be a complete picture.

When St. Paul says, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name” (Phil 2, 9), he is asserting that Jesus is beyond all descriptions and beyond all definitions. That might be the reason for God

not to reveal His name and when he did so to Moses it was only as “I am”. God cannot be limited to a definition. He is beyond the comprehension of limited human intelligence. The same is true for Jesus also. However, when the incomprehensible willed to shrink into a comprehensible form and revealed himself to the limited comprehension of men, they gave him many names in accordance with their knowledge and experience.

Jesus lived in a village in Galilee as a carpenter. For the neighbors, he was the son of Joseph, the carpenter. Probably because Joseph had died earlier, many called him the son of Mary (Mk 6, 3). In time, Jesus left the workshop and started a different life. “On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue; and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands?” (Mk 6, 2). However, wonder did not lead the people to further search and deepen their faith but only to fear and rejection of Jesus. They refused to see him as anything but a carpenter and drove him out of the village. Everywhere he went, those who heard him, wondered who he was. Each one made his own conclusion based on their personal experience.

The voice of John the Baptist resounded in the wilderness of Judea, where Jordan joined the Dead Sea. He invited the people for conversion and to receive the baptism of repentance. The carpenter from Nazareth also went with them to receive the baptism. Shortly after, Jesus also began to preach. He announced that the time of expectation has ended and the prophecies are fulfilled. God has begun his rule on earth. Prepare your hearts to accept the Kingdom of God. As the life of John the Baptist ended in the prison of Herod, the activities of Jesus expanded.

All across Galilee, the voice of Jesus resounded. Thousands gathered around him. God’s power went out through him. The blind saw; the deaf heard; the dumb spoke; the cripple walked; the paralytic got up and walked; the leper was cured; and the dead returned to life through his words and deeds. In total

amazement the people acclaimed him “Prophet” (Lk 9, 7-9; 19). When the dead son of the widow was restored to life and when they heard Jesus raising his voice against injustice, the people said that the prophet Elijah had returned (Lk 9, 8). For the common people, he was the prophet from Galilee (Mt 21, 11). When He revealed the secret life of the Samaritan woman, she called him a prophet (Jn 4, 19). The blind man whose eyesight was restored also acclaimed him as a prophet (Jn 9, 7). The soldiers in the yard of the High Priest Annas, blindfolded him and beating him asked him to prophecy because they had heard that he was a prophet (Mk 14, 65).

Having eaten the bread Jesus multiplied miraculously, the people acclaimed him as the one to come. “When the people saw the sign which he had done, they said, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!” Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (Jn 6, 14-15). Another term the contemporaries used to define Jesus was the “Messiah”, or Christ, which means the anointed one. The people expected that a king would come to free them from foreign rule. Those who witnessed the words and deeds of Jesus thought that the expectation was fulfilled in Jesus and they shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” (Jn 12, 13). This royal reception took place towards the end of his Public life.

Many saw Jesus as the Son of David. People who saw him exorcise the evil spirit asked, “Can this be the Son of David?” (Mt 12, 23). The Syro-Phoenician woman who begged him to heal her daughter, who was possessed by devil, addressed Jesus as Son of David (Mt 15, 22). The blind man on the way to Jericho, Bartimaeus, also called him Son of David. “When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mk 10, 47). When Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, accompanied by thousands, people

received him as the Son of David. Many who saw him said that the one that was to come has come. They saw him as the fulfillment of prophecies and promises given to the Fathers.

People's hopes and expectations were based on the promises in the Old Testament, but the personality of Jesus could not be limited to them. Even those who called him by the names that were familiar to them knew that his personality went beyond their comprehension. So, they were filled with wonder in the presence of Jesus. When the paralytic got up and walked, when the dead rose to life, they wondered who he was as they realized that he was beyond their expectations. They were shocked when he said, "Your sins are forgiven" (Mk 2, 7-12) as they knew that only God could forgive sins.

The words and deeds of Jesus went far beyond the imagination of the people of the time. They could not understand the way he broke the traditions and laws that were observed as God-given laws. Observation of the Sabbath according to the letter of the law was the most sacred tradition for the Jews. But, Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; so the Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath" (Mk 2, 27-28). This also created some opposition to Him. Not only in the matter of food but in all matters, ritual cleanliness was observed strictly by the Jews but Jesus gave no value to such laws and they felt that Jesus was a challenge to their faith and sacred traditions (Mk 7, 1-23).

From the beginning, the Jewish leaders observed Jesus with suspicion as they saw him as a rebel who would lead the people astray. Hence, they keenly observed every move he made. They examined his words and activities and its effect on the people. Based on them they reached a conclusion. They saw him as a sinner whose words and deeds were blasphemous and so dangerous to their faith. Hence they wanted to do away with him as early as possible (Mk 2, 7-16. 24; 3, 6). From then on, they conspired to achieve this goal.

They tried to distance the people from him, accusing him of doing all kinds of evil things: he does not obey the law; he was a glutton and drunkard; he associates with tax collectors and prostitutes (Lk 7, 34); he was a Samaritan (Jn 8, 48); he has gone insane (Mk 3, 21); he was possessed by Satan (Jn 8, 48); he was in agreement with Satan (Mk 3, 22) etc. Since they evaluated him according to the Old Testament views, they could not comprehend him or accept him. The royal entry into Jerusalem and the purification of the temple added support to their determination to kill him.

Political authorities also could not understand him. Herod had beheaded John the Baptist to satisfy the dancer and her mother, but the king lived in fear. He saw in Jesus the personification of John (Mk 6, 16) and so he threatened to kill Jesus if he did not go away. "At that very hour some Pharisees came, and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." And he 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 did not bend his knee before the Roman Empire either. To the lawyers who approached him with the problem of tax, he told them to seek first the Kingdom of God and its matters (Mk 12, 13-17). He reminded the Roman Governor that even Caesar was under God. "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). Pilate could not understand a kingdom that was not of this world and saw Jesus as a rebel and threat to the Roman Empire. With that conviction he condemned him, and handed him over for Crucifixion, for He claimed to be the king of the Jews! However Pilate knew that he was standing before a power he did not understand and that is why he asked "what is the Truth".

The Identity of Jesus

From the beginning of the public life of Jesus, the Apostles were with him. The friendship and association that began on the banks of the Sea of Galilee lasted till the Last Supper. For three years they stayed with him and witnessed his words and activities. They were so attracted to his personality that with a single word of invitation, they left everything and followed him. However, they stood in awe at the question who he was? A word from his mouth calmed the sea. They could not help but ask, “Who is this?” (Lk 8, 35). His authority and commanding power were beyond their comprehension. When he asked, “Who do you say I am” the response they gave was, “You are Christ” (Mk 8, 35), could come only from the lips of a Jew. Since it could lead to misunderstanding, Jesus warned them not to say that to anyone else. St. Mathew has recorded the same incident but it was the faith formed after the resurrection of Jesus.

A Different Kind of Master

Those who walked with him had their worldly dreams. Their eyes were on power and wealth (Mk 10, 35-37; Lk 22, 24). Even the disciples had not fully renounced these dreams. They had hoped that Jesus was the one to liberate Israel from foreign powers (Lk 24, 21). After the resurrection, “When they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1, 6). Even when the disciples professed that Jesus was the Messiah, they could not figure out who Jesus was. The personality of Jesus was that deep. He asserted that no one who refused to love him more than one’s father and mother, and even more than one’s own life, was not fit to follow him and not fit to be called his disciple. What he said and did were beyond their intellect and reason. At the Last Supper, he knelt before them and washed their feet. He broke the bread and gave it to them saying it was his body broken for them. Finally came the helpless cry from the Cross. All these only increased the sense of mystery in them.

A New Faith

Only after the experience of Pentecost did the Apostles get a glimpse into the depth of the personality of Jesus. In the light of that new insight, they began to look at Jesus anew and proclaimed this new discovery and knowledge as a matter of faith. This new knowledge and faith marked a change in the Jewish concept of God and it provided a deeper understanding of the name of “Jesus”. They realized that the One who bore the name “Yahweh, the Redeemer” is himself God Incarnate. They confessed Jesus as the Redeemer who gives eternal life, healing of illness and forgiveness of sins.

With that conviction they proclaimed Jesus Christ as God and Savior of the world. New names began to appear to refer to Jesus. “Son of God” took on a different meaning compared to its Old Testament use. “Lord” was a translation of “Yahweh”, the name revealed to Moses. When the disciples called Jesus, “Lord” they were proclaiming his divinity or equality with God. It was in the light of this “post resurrection” faith, that all the New Testament books were written. Hence, this faith is reflected in the profession of faith of the Apostles, recorded in the Gospels. The heart rending cry of St. Thomas: “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20, 28), is the shortest form of the Creed of the Apostolic Community.

Promise Fulfilled

The infancy narratives of Mathew and Luke depict this faith that Jesus came as the fulfillment of the expectations and promises given to the Fathers of Israel. Jesus was born as King, as the Son of Abraham and Son of David (Mt 1, 1). The meaning of his name is the Savior “who liberates the people from the slavery of sin” (Mt 1, 21). Jesus is the presence of God in the midst of the people. He was called “Emmanuel” which means “God with us” (Mt 1, 23). The Wise men from the East worshiped him, seeing him as God (Mt 2, 11). St. Mathew

concluded his Gospel with this proclamation of Jesus: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28, 20).

The narration of St. Luke followed the same literary style. Jesus was born of Mary through the special intervention of God. “The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Lk 1, 35). By giving names that were used only for God in the Old Testament, such as Lord (Lk 1, 43; 1, 76) and Savior (Lk 1, 69; 2, 11-31), St. Luke was professing the faith of the Apostles.

Personality of Jesus

There are no words or concept that would fully describe the personality of Jesus. St. John has used various phrases to reveal the depth of that personality. In the very beginning of the Gospel, the Evangelist tries to reveal the depth of the personality of Jesus by giving Him new names and attributes. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (Jn 1, 1-2). “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1, 5). “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (Jn 1, 14). The reality is that “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (Jn 1, 18). There are still more statements in the Gospel that shed light into the depth of the personality of Jesus. According to John, Jesus is the “Bread of Life” (Jn 6, 35); the Light of the world (Jn 8, 12); the Door to life (Jn 10, 9); the Good Shepherd (Jn 10, 14); the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14, 6); the Resurrection and the Life (Jn 11, 25) etc.

Jesus did not want his human nature to be forgotten while emphasizing the Divine nature. The disciples were aware of this and all four Gospels record that Jesus called himself, “Son of Man”. Surprisingly only Jesus used this term to refer to himself.

In short, “the Most High” came down. The immortal became mortal; God became man. Jesus is at the same time man and God. Who can comprehend the personality of one who is at once God and man?

Persecutor Turns Disciple

We see the same faith and awareness in the letters of St. Paul also. From the moment Jesus encountered Saul on the way to Damascus, Saul became a faithful disciple and Jesus became his Lord. Saul became Paul. Oppressor became disciple. Paul came to know Jesus through a personal experience that included a call and a response. It was a master-disciple relationship. With this relationship, the life of Paul turned upside down and it provided him the opportunity to know Jesus more closely and more deeply.

The relationship was so deep that he could say, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1, 21). In other words, Paul felt that he had become one with Christ, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and, the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2, 20). As long as we remain with God, there is nothing to fear and no force can separate us from Christ. “If God is for us, who is against us? . . . For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8, 31-39). No one can measure the quality of this relationship and no one has the power to comprehend its breadth and length and height and depth (Eph 3, 18). According to Paul it did not matter if he lived or died because “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14, 8).

The disciples realized that Jesus would accompany us all through our life and take us into the real home to enjoy the

eternal life with the Lord (Jn 14, 1,3; Lk 22, 30; 2 Cor 5, 8-9). Evangelists, Mark and Luke, when presenting the ascension of the Lord, gave emphasis to his glorification. Mathew and John, who have not recorded the ascension of Jesus, emphasize His presence in our midst. The one who died and resurrected for us stays with us all the time.

The glory and grandeur of Jesus are most evident in the Book of Revelation. The one who offered himself for the salvation of the world, winning over sin and death, resurrected. The Lamb (Rev 5, 6) standing, before the throne of the Most High as though it had been slain, is none other than Jesus. The Son of man who holds the suffering Church in his hands and stands in the middle of the Church (Rev 1, 12-13) is Jesus. He is at the same time God, King and Priest. With the Father He sits on the throne in heaven and accepts the adoration of all creation (Rev 5, 11-14). He is the beginning and end of all that is. Everything begins in Him and everything is restored in Him. He is the King of kings and the Lord of the lords (Rev 17, 14; 19, 16) and He is the one who guides the history of the universe. He abolishes all evil and brings the good to total victory.

CONCLUSION

Jesus Christ is the Light House of Hope to those who are drowning in the sea of life. He is the firm anchor for the ship caught in a wild storm. He is the fulfillment of all the promises God made to humanity. In Him the Kingdom of God became a reality. Through him all the people in the world are blessed. He is healing for the sick; forgiveness to the sinners; light to the blind. Those who look at him become enlightened. Those who put their trust in him will not despair.

Though Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God on earth, it has not yet been fully realized. He will come back to wipe away every tear from the eyes those who weep and to give life to those in the tombs. He will not leave us orphans! When “I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (Jn 14, 3). He prayed, “Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world” (Jn 17, 24). The Father will not refuse His prayers. The Kingdom of God will be fully realized when we become one with Jesus. “I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me” (Jn 17, 23).

Until the Kingdom of God finds its full realization, the people of God must walk through the path of the cross, suffering their daily pains and difficulties. Jesus did not promise to take us away from this world or to eliminate all the pains that come with it. However, He has promised that he will be with

us in our suffering and will give us the strength to accept them, giving them a new meaning in the light of the Life to come. . “I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16, 33).

Jesus is with us in all our suffering. He is support and help to all those who labor and carry heavy burdens. We are to carry our daily cross and follow the One who won victory over death. When we drown in the sea, Jesus will put out his hand to save us as he did to Peter: “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Mt 14, 31). We can find consolation in his open wounds and so, “Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12, 1-2).

The one, who won the victory over death and promised to be with us to the end of time, is the one who received all the authority from the Father (Mt 28, 18-20). He is the one who says: “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done” (Rev 22, 12). “The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev 7, 17). Jesus is the hope of the world (Col 1, 27). All those who believe that Jesus, who is the light tower of the hope of the ages, is in them, are prophets of hope and they prepare the way for His coming. They cry out in loud voice, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev 22, 20) “*Maranatha*” and they hear the response of Jesus, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22, 20).

Jesus Christ is above and beyond all names and attributes. No name suffices to reveal him fully. Each name and each

attribute reveals only an aspect of that great mystery. He is the personification of God's mercy, love and providence. He is a prophet who cries for justice. He is a revolutionary who would turn over the thrones of the kings and emperors that are rooted in corruption and injustice. He is the Divine Master (Guru) who wipes away the darkness of ignorance that enslaves humanity. He is the One who offered himself on the altar of love to give healing to the sick, forgiveness to sinners, consolation to the afflicted, hope to the desperate, acceptance to the rejected and life to the dead. The life he gives lasts beyond death, to eternity. He was wounded for the world. He took upon himself the sins of the world. He was broken to become food for others. Yet He still lives today and forever. He lives in you and in me, especially in the brother who turns to you in his misery. He lives in us as God, as strength, as consolation, as call, as challenge, and mission. But, only the one who follows Him accepting His call can recognize Him. Jesus can be known only through discipleship.

Jesus has said that, ***“If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him”*** (Jn 14, 23).

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