

# THOSE WHO DEVOUR

The Widows' Houses and the Widow's Mite



REV. DR. MICHAEL KARIMATTAM

# Those Who Devour The Widows' Houses and the Widow's Mite

"Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119,105). There are, nevertheless, incidents and teachings in the Bible that are difficult to understand. Hence there arise problems when persons, not properly trained, try to interpret such passages. The message the sacred author intended to convey, or the Truth that God reveals might not be correctly understood when verses are taken out of context and interpreted just literally. Worse than that, often the very opposite of the intended message could be inferred from the verses. This book analyses 24 of such passages and tries to interpret them in the light of Biblical hermeneutics and the official teachings of the Catholic Church.



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“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market places ... They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation... ‘Truly I tell you: this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had’, all she had to live on” (Mk 12, 38-44).

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by **Dr. Michael Karimattam**

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Translated by: Sr. Glorista SABS

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# INTRODUCTION

No other people in the world seem to possess as much interest in the Bible as the people of Kerala. The proclamations of Vatican II that concluded in 1965 and the Charismatic Renewal Movement that gained momentum in the 1970's vastly ignited this interest. With the publication of the official translation of the Bible in Malayalam on 31 December 1981 by the Catholic Church in Kerala, the Bible became easily available in the vernacular to anyone interested in the Holy Book. The activities of the regional Pastoral Orientation (P.O.C.), Retreat Centres, Conventions and Study classes further helped the growth of people's interest in and love for the Bible.

There are, however, some problems when persons, not properly trained, try to interpret and teach the Bible. The intended message of the sacred author or the Truth that God revealed through him, might not be correctly understood when the verses were interpreted just literally. Worse than that, often the very opposite of intended message might be inferred from the verses.

It is important that we give heed to the warning of St. Peter: “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pt 1, 20).

We may also bear in mind the Church’s teachings in this regard: “However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.... For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God” (Dei Verbum §12).

Such being the case, we require help for an authentic interpretation of the Bible. More so, because some events and sayings are difficult to understand and some are prone to be misinterpreted. Also, a great many questions remain unanswered despite the fact that there are several good books on the Bible available in the market.

In this booklet, 24 commonly debated issues are taken up for consideration and tried to give an answer, strictly following the guidelines of the Catholic Church regarding the interpretation of the Bible and her official teachings about faith and morals. My fervent hope is that the book would throw some light on these issues and will help deepen our understanding of the Word of God.

The English translation is prepared by Sr. Glorista SABS. Rev. Dr. Joseph Thalody and Mr. Joseph Raj have checked the translation carefully and have made valuable suggestions. My heartfelt thanks go to all the three of them. A word of sincere thanks to Fr.Xavier OFMCap and the staff of the Media House Delhi, for their interest and hard work in bringing out this English edition. May the Lord bless them all.





# 1

## IS GOD JEALOUS?

Jealousy is regarded as a root cause of all evil that could drive a person to many other vices. But strange, in certain parts of the Bible, God Himself is portrayed as being jealous. If even God can be jealous, how can jealousy be a sin? Again, if being jealous is part of the Original Sin, how can God be jealous?

All are very logical questions. To find answers, we have to understand first what is meant by the word “jealous”, second, what is the origin of this word, and then finally, how ‘being jealous’ becomes a sin.

### The Word “Jealous” and its Many Meanings

The first time the word ‘jealous’ appears in the Bible is in the context of the “Ten Commandments”: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God” (Ex 20, 4-5). Some translations use the terms ‘intolerant’ or ‘zealous’ rather than the word ‘jealous’.

The origin of the word 'jealous' in Hebrew is "Ghana" which means burning, lighted etc. When translated into Greek, it became "Zelos (noun)" or "Zelotes (adjective)". This word got translated into English as 'Zealot' which means "one who was fired up for a cause that he would become a fighter for that cause". Some of the disciples of Jesus were regarded as Zealots. For example, there is this mention in the Gospel about Simon: "Simon, who was called the Zealot" (Lk 6, 15).

Broadly, 'being jealous' is regarded as one of the characteristics of God. But if so, it can only mean that God is intolerant, or that God is zealous. Let us reason it out further.

The word 'jealous' in common usage implies the ill feeling we have towards someone when he/she succeeds more than we, or does better or becomes more popular. As a result, we may develop feelings of hatred towards him/her and would even desire to harm him/her in some way. That is how this feeling can develop into a grievous sin.

Can we even think of God being 'jealous' in this sense? Far from it! It logically follows that the word 'jealous' in respect to the God of the Bible can at best be interpreted as being 'intolerant', or as being 'zealous'. This can be justified.

## The Intolerant God

But, what do we have in mind when we say someone is 'intolerant'? Being intolerant means that we have difficulty to accept a person as he is, his ideas or his life style. An intolerant person tends to misjudge whatever the other person does and hastens to harm him. His attitude is: "I am OK, you are NOT Ok,"

An extreme expression of this behaviour is seen among the terrorists. They have no tolerance to anything that is different from their idea or the idea of their party or religion. Lack of tolerance is the evil element behind all religious bigotry that exists today. If this is what jealousy means, how can jealousy be an attribute of God? Will we dare to think that God could be intolerant in this sense?

We find the answers in an Old Testament verse. "Thus, says the Lord of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath" (Zech 8, 2). Here 'Jealousy' was not the outcome of seeing some good happening to someone but of a deep pain arising out of sensing a danger of losing one's beloved and the fierce determination to prevent that occurrence at any costs.

Israel was a People God had elected and protected. The covenant He made with them has been explained as a marriage contract since the time of Hosea (Hos 1, 2; 2, 2; 7, 14-19). The prophets considered idol worship, forsaking the true God and adoring other gods, as idolatry.

God knew that through idol worship the people would lose their very life. He wanted to prevent that from happening and to bring them back to Himself. Foreseeing the evil that would befall the people He had elected and had loved, God became jealous and intolerant. In this sense jealousy is neither a sin nor an evil quality, but a virtue that would save one from perishing. That is how it became part of the Decalogue.

## The Zealous God

Breaking the commandment of God is equivalent to forsaking God or going away from Him. When one moves away from God, the source of life, the person is sure to die. That is why God lamented through Prophet Jeremiah, “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jer 2, 13).

Through Prophet Isaiah God expressed his anguish for his people, “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evil doers, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord...” (Is 1, 2-4). In none of these outbursts do we see any sign of hatred but only an ardent desire to save the people He loves from all disaster.

In the jealousy of God, we see the affection and care a mother hen has toward its chicks, keeping them protected under her wings, so that they would not be attacked by eagles or crows. Should she sense any threat, the hen would fight with its beak and claws to protect its chicks. This is what any animal or any people would do to protect their young.

In this protective care, the motherly love takes on the characteristics of jealousy and intolerance. Here the focus is not on what would happen to the mother but on the disaster that would befall the offspring.

The words of St. Paul might help to understand the meaning of this term further, "I feel a divine jealousy for you" (2 Cor 11, 2).

### **Evil Side of True Jealousy**

However, we are not to conclude that all forms of jealousy are permissible at all times. St. Paul has cited the evil side of jealousy many times (Rom 13, 13; 1 Cor 3, 3; 2 Cor 12, 20; Gal 5, 20). 'Jealousy' is commendable only when it refers to being zealous about doing good things in the name of God (Tit 2, 14; 1 Pt 3, 13).

### **To Sum it Up**

'Jealousy' is said to be a characteristic of God in the sense that He is intolerant and zealous. God is intolerant, because He is apprehensive and concerned about the disasters that are likely to befall His people because of their folly and unholy life. God is also zealous, meaning that He cares deeply for the life and prosperity of His people.

As we can realize, this is 'jealousy' at its best.

### **A Note to the Reader**

A word of caution about the Biblical Language is necessary. Words used in the Bible do not always carry the same meaning. The same word can mean different things in different contexts: when used in a story, in a drama or in an historical narrative. To know the specific meaning of a word in a particular context, we need to take into account the circumstances, the literary style of the text and the aim of the author, the likely purpose he had in mind. If we fail to do so, we are guaranteed to misinterpret the Biblical teachings.

## 2

# “YOU CANNOT SEE MY FACE”

Moses was a great Leader. He was specially chosen and was prepared by God by getting exposed to various situations and challenges to lead his people. God said to him, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name” (Ex 33, 17). However, when Moses expressed his sincere desire to see the glory of God, God said, “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (Ex 33, 20). God made it possible for Moses to see only His back, “I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (Ex 33, 23). What does all this mean? Why did God hide His face?

Strangely, the Bible also says that Moses spoke to God, face to face like friends: “The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Ex 33, 11). This is stated right before Moses beseeched to see the glory of God. Isn’t that puzzling?

Here is another verse worth considering. "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Dt 34, 10). If the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, how come Moses could not see His face?

To say that these assertions belong to two different sources does not settle the issue. We have therefore to look for answers elsewhere. Maybe a careful analysis of the dialogue between Moses and God could provide us the clue.

## The Beatific Vision

Moses' plea was not to see God's face but the "glory of God". Moses asked, "Show me your glory, I pray" (Ex 33, 18). This would mean that Moses' expressed desire was to see God as He is, in His full glory. Such a request is understandable as it echoes the deepest aspiration of any human soul. The Church speaks of this as the longing for 'the "Beatific Vision"'.

The Beatific Vision has been promised to man. The Bible says: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 Jn 3, 2). This would only happen after death.

People who are living in this world cannot see God as He is because of the limitations of the human body. Let us take an example. We cannot see anything without light, but if we try to look at the blazing sun at noon, we will not be able to see anything either. This was what God said to Moses when he sought to see the

glory of God. It is impossible for a man on earth to see God as He is. Should there be a gush of electrical power, all the electrical devices and equipment's would get burnt. Something similar would happen if man were to see the glory of God in its fullness. That is why God said, "No one shall see me and live" (Ex 33, 20).

## Sinful Man Cannot See God

No sinful man can stand in front of God who is all Holiness. As snow cannot survive near the fire, a sinner cannot survive in the presence of God. This is emphasized again and again in the Bible.

The fear to face God had its origin in the Paradise, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Gen 3, 10). When Moses encountered God in the burning bush, he was afraid, "And he said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God"(Ex.3,6).The same was the reaction of Manoah when his wife told him about the vision she had: "We shall surely die, for we have seen God" (Jgs 13, 22). Upon recognizing the presence of God, Isaiah became terrified and cried out, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Is 6, 5). The disciples felt the same way when they recognized the presence of God in Jesus (Lk 5, 8-10; 9, 34).

## God Reveals Himself

Seeing the face of God refers to seeing God as He is or seeing the glory of God in its fullness. This



is not possible in this world. And so, the assertion that "God spoke to Moses face to face" must have a different meaning. Whereas God reveals His plan to the prophets and saints with the help of dreams and inspiration, to Moses the revelation is given directly, without the help of these. This confirms the view that the revelation Moses received was direct and authentic. It also implies that Moses was the greatest prophet in the Old Testament.

"You can see my back". We are not to take this pronouncement literally. There is no 'front' or 'back' to God who is spirit and invisible to human eyes. All it means is that God has revealed Himself through history. God's glory is there to see in the entire universe. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps 19, 1). St. Paul says that we can come to know God through the nature (Rom 1, 19-20).

The history of Israel documented in the Bible reveals the work of God. God's doings are manifested in His people and in the various other events. Moses asked God His name when God appeared to him. The response God gave meant in essence that He is one who reveals Himself through actions.

Name signifies a definition but God is beyond all definitions. The word "Yahweh" means "I am who I am". To know Him we have to go with Him and see what He does. At every step of the redemptive mission God kept saying: "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians" (Ex 6, 7; 11. 7; 12, 29-36; 14, 25; Ezek 12, 20; 36,11; 37, 6).

God reveals Himself through His actions. People should bear in mind the great things God has done to different individuals and to the society as a whole. This knowledge should be passed down to the coming generations. The people of Israel kept this memory alive through the celebrations of the Feasts such as the Passover, the Pentecost and the Feast of the Tents. God has exhorted repeatedly that the people of Israel must remember His deeds and teach them to their children (Ex 12, 26-27; 16, 33-34; Dt 4, 9; 6, 20; 26, 1-15).

In order to continue as the people of God, they had to obey the Ten Commandments. Of the “Ten Commandments”, the first one is a clear enunciation of God’s great work in Egypt. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20, 2-3).

## God’s Face is Jesus

The greatest revelation of God in history occurred through Jesus Christ. “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1, 14). Thus, the prayer of Moses was answered to some extent in and through Jesus. Of course, this is not the perfect Vision as it could happen only in heaven.

In the words of St. Paul: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face” (1Cor 13, 12). Until that happens, we have to keep the knowledge of God alive through various remembrances. At the Last Supper Jesus commanded, to keep alive the

memory of His total giving by re-enacting what He did for us, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22,19).

We see God not only in the great events of the Salvation History but also in the events of our own personal lives. If we look with faith, we can recognize God's presence in every creature, in every situation and in every experience we have. Nothing in our lives happens without His knowledge. Every event reveals His love and care for us, and His limitless mercy. We are called to live with joy under His protective wings and to have our hearts filled with gratitude for His abundant love and care for us.

## To Sum Up

If we remain open, we can recognize God's love, His presence and His face in everything around us, in His creation, in the events of history, in our personal lives and in our experiences. This is what is meant by seeing the 'back' of God.

As for our wanting to see God's glory in its fullness and splendour, His real Face, we shall have to wait and to work hard. Through a life of prayer and good deeds, we have first to qualify for an entry pass to be allowed into the Kingdom of God. As of now, this has to be our sole focus.

### 3

# MOSES WAS NOT TO ENTER THE PROMISED LAND

Moses had endured great hardships to remain faithful to God all his life. Yet he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. Why did God deal with him so harshly by? What was the intended lesson?

## **Moses the Greatest Prophet**

According to the Bible, Moses was the greatest prophet and leader in Israel. “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel” (Dt 34, 10-12).

God chose Moses and appointed him as the leader and liberator of the people of Israel. He revealed

Himself to Moses and conversed with him as if with a friend. Even so, he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land.

God did not listen to his final plea to allow him to see the fertile land beyond the Jordan. "Let me cross over to see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon. But the Lord was angry with me on your account and would not heed me" (Dt 3, 25-26). To all appearances, God dealt with Moses very severely. What is being taught through this incident?

Bible states repeatedly that Moses died before entering the Promised Land. Of all the people that left Egypt for Canaan, only Joshua and Caleb reached the final destination. The reason cited for it is that the people did not remain faithful to the Lord.

Apparently, the same is true of Moses as well. Moses explained this in his final discourse in the valley of Nebo at the threshold of the Promised Land: "Even with me the Lord was angry on your account, saying, "You also shall not enter there" (Dt 1, 37). Just as the Bible speaks of the stubborn nature of the people, it also lays bare the shortcomings of Moses. Moses had turned unfaithful to God while on the way to the Promised Land, which is what prevented him from entering the Promised Land. The incident is described in detail in Numbers 20, 1-13 and is also mentioned in Dt. 32, 51-52.

## Failings of Moses

The people had left Mount Sinai and had reached the wilderness of Zin. There was no water for the

people to drink. They complained and quarrelled with Moses and Aaron about the lack of water and food. They cursed Moses and Aaron for bringing them out of Egypt and not bringing them to the Promised Land. Moses and Aaron prayed to God and they received direction from God to respond to the needs of the people.

Let us pay careful attention to the instruction God gave to Moses and what Moses did. God said to Moses, “Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus, you shall bring water out of the rock for them; you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock” (Nm 20, 8).

Though the people often tended to complain about anything and everything, this time they had a good reason to complain. There was no water to drink. Therefore, God did not rebuke them but asked Moses to provide them the water. As commanded by God, Moses did take the staff in his hand, but what he did thereafter was totally out of character, very different from his usual behaviour.

Moses and Aaron assembled the people before the rock. Moses said, “Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank” (Nm 20, 10-11). Three things are to be said about the behaviour of Moses.

1. First, let us note the way Moses addressed the people “Listen you rebels”. Though it is true that the people had complained and murmured

all the time, on this occasion there was hardly any justification to scold them. It was God who instructed Moses and Aaron to do certain things to provide them water. Moses was clearly guilty of anger and intemperate language. While God had compassion on the people, Moses did not seem as much concerned about their needs. What is worse, he openly rebuked them.

2. Second, let us consider what Moses said to them, "Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" The question certainly concealed a certain degree of arrogance. Instead of praising God for providing water to the people, he spoke as if it was he who would be bringing the water to them. He made no mention of God. This all amounted to forgetting God's power and His compassion, and an attempt at self-glorification.
3. Third, Moses had been instructed to command the rock to yield water. But what Moses did was to strike the rock with the staff, and that too twice, as if he knew where the water was and it was the power of his blow that would bring out the water. Moses thus put himself in God's place and usurped the glory that solely belonged to God.

Moses was guilty of several offences. One, Moses did not carry out God's instruction as he had been told. Instead of commanding the rock to yield water, he struck the rock with his staff. It was clearly an act of disobedience

Second, he did not tell the people that it was God's doing, it is because of God's mercy and compassion that they were getting the water: Moses failed to

glorify God before the people. “Because you rebelled against my word in the wilderness of Zin when the congregation quarrelled with me, you did not show my holiness before their eyes at the waters” (Nm 27, 14).

It was God’s compassion for the suffering people that led to their liberation from slavery and their entry into the Promised Land. Moses and Aaron failed to act in ways that would have helped the people to grow in the awareness of the love and compassion of God.

Third, Moses struck the rock twice. This would seem as though Moses did not have adequate faith in God. Even so God performed the needed miracle and catered to their legitimate needs. God protected the people and ensured that the misdeeds of their leader did not have any adverse effect on the satisfaction of their need.

“Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them” (Num 20,12). It was for these reasons Moses and Aaron were prevented from entering the Promised Land.

## Key Lessons

We have several important lessons to take from these events:

1. People belong to God and He has compassion on them. Only those who are appointed as leaders could lead them. They are obliged to lead the people according to His will. It is not the leaders but God who protects the people and performs the miracles. If anyone loses sight of this and tries



to act as if he were God, it will be a grave offence. There will be such temptations along the way in all our lives. Even someone like Moses who had received special gifts and blessings fell prey to such a misguided thinking.

2. God shows no favouritism. He acts impartially. Anyone who commits sin will be punished. Those who have been given more will be expected to do more. "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (Lk 12, 48). If a great leader like Moses was not spared but was severely punished for his offences, we cannot expect to be dealt with differently or leniently, should we also be guilty of violating any of God's commands. What happened to Moses should serve as a warning to all.
3. God has entrusted a mission to each one of us. When your mission is completed, you might be asked to step down. You must not insist that you should be allowed to bring the task you started to the conclusion. The task entrusted to Moses was to bring the people of Israel out of the slavery in Egypt and bring them to the threshold of the Promised Land. It was Joshua who had been chosen to lead them to the Promised Land. Everyone must find satisfaction in completing the work given to him/her and move on without protests and complaints. In this regard our role model is John the Baptist. He happily withdrew from the scene once he had prepared the way for the Messiah and had made Him known to the world.

4. Though Moses could not enter the Promised Land, God allowed him to see that beautiful land from a distance. He had the satisfaction of knowing that the people would be settling down in a fertile land. Moses was then called to rest. God has a specific plan for every one; hence one cannot complain that God did injustice to Moses.
5. At a time when there was no clear understanding about life after death, having to die outside the Promised Land would have appeared to be a punishment. Being in the Promised Land was regarded as being with God and being outside of the Promised Land amounted to being cast out of His presence. But, the Divine revelation through Jesus has provided us with a clearer picture of life after death and of the Promised Land which is yet to come.

## To Sum Up

There is no reason to doubt whether God was fair to Moses. The denial of entry to Moses into the Promised Land is not to be construed as an ultimate punishment. At best it can be viewed as a bit of disciplining done by God for his unbecoming conduct towards the end of the journey out of Egypt. In itself, his death before reaching the Promised Land merely signalled the completion of his part of the work.

## 4

# GOD WHO HEARS THE PRAYER

### Power of Personal Prayer

If a person or a family in need of prayer entrusts the duty of praying for them to another person, a retreat centre or a religious community, claiming they have no time to pray and to take on the hardships involved therein, will God hear that prayer?

The question reflects a distorted view of prayer. Prayer involves a personal relationship with God. It is not a means to obtain something. We are not to look at prayer with a business mentality. If a person says that he/she has no time to bathe and asks another person to bathe for him/her, will that person's body become clean? In the same way, can someone else eat to satisfy my hunger? Can someone else undergo treatment for my illness? This has to be certainly true with regard to prayer as well.

## Meaning of Prayer

God will accept intercessory prayers on my behalf but such a prayer cannot be a substitute for my personal prayer. Prayer is a means to get closer to God. Engaging in daily conversation with God would enable me to establish a better relationship with God. Hence it is important that every day we set aside at least some time to pray, to communicate with God. One who has a positive relationship with God would pray all the time.

Significant is the command God gave to Abraham, “The Lord appeared to Abraham, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless” (Gen 17, 1). The first component of prayer is the awareness that we are in the presence of God.

Reciting certain prayers learned by heart is not the best of prayers. What is far more important is that we learn to raise our hearts to God in an act of surrender. We need no particular time or place for such a prayer. Small recitations or ejaculatory prayer, invoking God’s name and singing His praises, are all prayers that could be done at any time. The exhortation of St. Paul is significant here, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 5, 16-18).

## Experiencing God’s Love

Being granted the blessing we prayed for is only a small part of the prayer. Experiencing God’s love, His affection and His mercy, are the very essence of

prayer. It is through prayer that we discern the will of God. Praising God, invoking His name and giving thanks for all the blessings we have received are all various forms of true prayer. Nobody else can do this for us. We have to take time to pray.

However, the close bonds existing in a community are expressed through intercessory prayers. It is commendable that one person prays for another or the entire community prays for one person. All such prayers are bound to produce positive results. But without oneself praying, if a person were to entrust the duty of praying to someone else, that would be grossly wrong. Such an attitude is not likely to serve any useful purpose.

When it comes to praying, we cannot hire someone to do the job for us. There is no justification for avoiding to pray on the pretext that we have no time. To lift our hearts to God would not require much time but merely a willingness to pray. "Where there is a will, there is a way".

## To Sum Up

There is no scope for "delegation" with respect to your personal growth and, more especially, with regard to prayer. You have to do your own growing up, your own praying. No one else can do this for you

Personal Prayer enables us to develop a close relationship with God. As air is essential for the body, prayer is essential for our soul. So, let us all pray regularly and experience the power of personal prayer in our life.

## 5

# THE CREED

### Why Two Different Creeds?

Why are there two different Creeds? One we recite before starting the Rosary and a different Creed we say in the church during the Holy Mass. One Creed says Jesus descended into hell, referred to in Greek as 'sheol'. In the other Creed, there is no mention about the descent into hell. Is 'sheol' and hell one and the same thing? If so, why did Jesus visit hell?

There are two different issues here; one about the Creed and the other about hell, the Netherworld. We shall discuss them separately.

### The Creed

First, we shall discuss the significance of the two different Creeds. They both are similar, and yet there are certain differences. The Creed professed in the Catholic Church was formulated over the years. We can see the initial steps of the evolution of the Creed in the New Testament itself. The shortest profession

of faith was made by St. Thomas as he exclaimed in absolute wonder, "My Lord and My God" (Jn 20,28).

The proclamation of Peter was a little longer. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16, 16). The person of Jesus and His relationship with the Father are professed here. In the letter to the Romans we see a more elaborate statement of our Faith: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom 10, 9). Such proclamations of faith and their descriptions could be seen in different parts of the Bible.

Eventually it became necessary to formulate a Creed that included all that a person had to believe to qualify to be a Christian. Such a proclamation of faith was made when the adults received Baptism. It was done in the form of a question and an answer, and also as a Creed which contained all the elements of our Faith. The most popular among them was the "Apostles' Creed", developed in the 3rd century.

This Creed that contained the fundamentals of Catholic Faith was recited by those who received the Baptism. The Creed was also made a part of the daily prayer. This was called the "Apostles' Creed", so titled because of the legend that it was the Apostles who created this Creed, each one contributing one element, before going to the four corners' of the world to proclaim the Gospel. This is the same Creed we recite daily while praying the Rosary. It is regarded as a complete Creed as it contains all the fundamental elements of the Catholic faith. Why do we then make use of a different Creed during the Holy Eucharist?

In the early Church, as the days went by, some people began to question certain parts of the Catholic Faith. Several issues, big and small, were brought up for discussion. What is the relationship between the Father and the Son? If both are God, are there two Gods? How did the Son come into being? Was Jesus Christ man or God? If he was a man, how could he be God? When answers were provided to such questions, inevitably some inaccuracies and errors crept in. Some Bishops and Theologians were also guilty of misinterpretations

All these controversial matters were the focus of study in the Ecumenical Councils. Thereafter Creeds were formulated, incorporating the key elements of the Faith. Of the Creeds put together, the most popular were the Creeds formulated in the Councils of Nicaea (325); Constantinople (381) and Chalcedon (451).

The Creed we recite in the Holy Mass is a combination of the Creeds formulated in the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. They contain the elements of the Faith, carefully preserved by the Church, once the dust had settled after the stormy discussions. Basically, all the Creeds proclaim the fundamentals of the Catholic Faith, though there are some variations in terms of emphasis.

## **Netherworld and Hell**

The second issue is about Jesus' visit to hell, the Netherworld. The Apostles' Creed says that Jesus "died, was buried and descended into hell". This is not found in the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople. It



is said that the word "suffered" includes the aspect of death as well and so the word "died" was not included. However, as this could lead to misunderstanding, the word "died" has been added in the Creed recited during the Mass. "Descended to the 'sheol", was meant to emphasize the fact that Jesus had really died. However, this does in no way rule out the likelihood of Jesus' visit to the Netherworld.

Belief in life after death gained strength and clarity gradually over a period of time. At the beginning of the Old Testament period, the belief was that all the dead were at rest in the Netherworld, which was considered as a bottomless pit or an immense dark cave, under the earth. To convey this idea, the Hebrew word "sheol" was used; it is translated into Greek as "Hades".

When in the course of time a clearer picture about the situation of dead was gained through revelation, then it was understood that not all the dead were in the same status. In fact, there was a change in the belief about life after death. The just would enjoy everlasting peace with God while the sinners would be condemned to suffer punishment in sheol. Gradually there came into existence the belief that there were several levels or compartments in sheol. Though all the dead went to the Netherworld, those who had done good went into the level called as the bosom of Abraham while those who had done evil went into hell, that was called Gehenna; the same word is used in Greek also to refer to hell. It shows that hell and Netherworld are not the same. However, in English both are translated as "hell".

From this distinction we can conclude that Jesus did go to or visit hell but the Netherworld. What does it mean? The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides a clear answer. "The frequently recited New Testament affirmations that Jesus was "raised from the dead" presuppose that the crucified one sojourned in the realm of the dead prior to his resurrection. This was the first meaning given to Christ's descent into hell in the apostolic preaching: that Jesus, like all men, experienced death and His soul joined the others in the realm of the dead. However, He descended there as Saviour, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there". (ccc § 632).

The main motive behind emphasizing the visit to the Netherworld was that the death of Jesus was not just a phantasy but a reality. The message conveyed is that through this visit, Jesus proclaimed the message of salvation to those who were awaiting salvation, and thereafter the just accompanied Him into heaven.

Jesus did not proclaim the Good News to those who were condemned to eternal punishment in hell. This was not the purpose of Jesus' visit to the Netherworld. "It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Saviour in Abraham's bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell. Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him" (ccc § 633).

"The gospel was preached even to the dead. The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfilment. This is the last

phase of Jesus' messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption" (ccc § 634).

## To Sum Up

The Creed is a Prayer that evolved over a period of centuries. It occupies a key place in our Liturgical services, the Rosary and other forms of Worship. The Creed is a clear statement and a declaration of the articles of our Faith.

The profession of faith about Jesus' visit to the Netherworld signifies that the death of Jesus was a reality. Its omission – Jesus' visit to the Netherworld - in one of the Creeds does not in any way affect the essential contents of the Creed. The core of the Creed is fully intact in both the versions.

## 6

# WHAT ARE THE DEAD DOING?

In some of the official prayers of the Church, especially in the Syro-Malabar liturgy of the Holy Eucharist there, is an expression “the great and the small, all the dead sleep with the hope that You will raise them up in Glory”. Is this statement true? It is generally believed that with the death of the individual the judgment, usually called the particular or personal judgment, is passed; those who are in the state of mortal sin will be condemned to hell; those who die in the state of grace will go to heaven; those who are still not perfect in love will be sent to purgatory to be purified. If this is true, then how can one say that the dead are sleeping? On the other hand, if all the dead sleeping till the resurrection of the dead at the end of the world and universal judgment, then what is the meaning of declaring some people as saints? What is the role purgatory?

The question deals with the life after death; it is a serious question and needs an answer. Let us first consider the teaching of the Bible. Belief about life

after death gained ground gradually. Initially, the prevailing conviction was that everything ended with death. This view of death is implied in a statement Job made, "Mortals lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep" (Job 14, 12). The prayer of the Psalmist also pictured death as an eternal sleep, "O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death" (Ps 13, 3).

### Temporary Sleep

Prophet Isaiah expressed the same idea in the poem he composed about Babylon, "Your pomp is brought down to sheol, and the sound of your harps; maggots are the bed beneath you, and worms are your covering" (Is 14, 11). "All the kings of the nation's lie in glory, each in his own tomb" (Is 14, 18). While singing about Babylon, Prophet Jeremiah expressed a similar idea, "When they are inflamed, I will set out their drink and make them drunk, until they become merry and then sleep a perpetual sleep and never wake, says the Lord" (Jer 51, 39).

Gradually awareness grew that the sleep was not eternal, but one day the dead would come alive. This gave rise to the belief in resurrection. "Your dead shall live; their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead" (Is 26, 11).

### Resurrection

The idea of resurrection became clearer in the Second book of Maccabees that was written during

the first half of the second century B.C. The youth who preferred to die rather than renounce the Faith said, “You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life” (2 Mc 7, 9).

Even in the New Testament, death was seen as sleep. “Lord, do not hold this sin against them. When he had said this, he died” (Acts 7, 60). In the original text in Greek, the word used was ‘sleep’ rather than “died”. To indicate the death of Lazar, Jesus used the word “sleep”. “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him” (Jn 11, 11). Jesus said the same thing about the daughter of Jairus, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping” (Mk 5, 39).

The book of Revelation viewed this sleep as a rest and death as a journey to the Lord. “Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.” “Yes”, says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them” (Rev. 14, 13).

Death is rest from all pain and suffering but it is not total rest in the sense of cessation of all activities. They will be active in singing praises to the Lord. Those who died for their Faith in the Lord, cry to the Lord: “They cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” (Rev. 6, 10).

## A Wait for the Resurrection

Those who died are resting but the rest was viewed as a wait in a state of prayer. “After this I

looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7, 9-10; 14, 1-5).

The teaching of the New Testament is: "The resurrection of the body would take place only at the end of the world". Until then the dead are not sleeping in the dust. The body is sleeping in the dust and the soul is alive in the presence of God. We can see this in the promise given to the thief crucified on the right side, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23, 43).

Paradise refers to the joy we experience in the presence of God. One who enters the presence of God after death is not sleeping. The fact that not only eternal joy but also punishment occur with death, is demonstrated through the parable of the Rich man and Lazar (Lk 16, 22-23).

From this view of the Bible, the answer to the initial question might be clear. The phrase, "The dead are in eternal sleep" was taken from the Old Testament. But, in the light of the knowledge we have gained from the New Testament, we know that sleeping is a state of the body that is awaiting resurrection. At the moment of death, the soul appears before God and receives the judgment. The verdict could be heaven, hell or purgatory.

It is in this sense that "RIP" (Rest in Peace) is written on the tomb. The soul is not in the tomb

but only the soil that consumed the body. This body would rest until it is resurrected at the end of the world, at the Last Judgment. The message of St. Paul to the Ephesians is to be viewed in this sense, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (Eph 5, 14). This way the significance of purgatory is not diminished.

Creation is completed only with the resurrection of the dead. The body of a dead person sleeps until then. But the soul would remain active as there is no death for the soul. Even though we speak of the death of the soul through mortal sin, the soul in this case does not cease to exist but has only distanced itself from God. In fact, only the body dies and that will end with the resurrection.

## To Sum Up

What happens to the body and soul, between a person’s death and the Last Judgment? The individual has already been handed out his/her personal judgment. The future is settled and sealed. What next? What happens to all the dead till the day of the Last Judgment?

The dead are, so to speak, in a state of sleep, in a kind of rest, in a wait, in a state of prayer. All this will end with the resurrection of the dead and the Last Judgment.

In the meanwhile, souls needing purification to be fully worthy to enter the Kingdom of God, take sojourn happily in Purgatory, knowing fully that the stay is short but the gains are great.



## 7

# PIETA AND THE WAY OF THE CROSS

During the Stations of the Cross, at the 13th Station, we commemorate the event of the body of Jesus being brought down from the Cross and then being laid in the lap of Mary, His mother. There is a famous statue called “PIETA” representing this scene because of which we have come to regard this event itself as PIETA. But we see no reference to this event in the Bible.

The Bible only says, “This man (Joseph of Arimathea,) went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then, he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid” (Lk 23, 52-53). Is there any other source where we can find some evidence to this event?

### The Making of PIETA

The statue known as PIETA was made by Michael Angelo, the famous Italian sculptor, in 1499, portraying

the scene of the body of Jesus lying in the lap of Mary, His mother, at the order of the French Cardinal Shanbier. The Cardinal had asked him to sculpt the statue in order to place it on his own tomb, and it was actually placed on his tomb. However, later on, in the 18th century the statue was shifted to Rome and was placed in St. Peter's Basilica, where it is housed today.

Though the statue made by Michael Angelo is very popular, the idea of placing the body of Jesus in the lap of His mother did not originate with him. Since the 13th century, there were pictures and statues depicting the scene of the body of Jesus lying in the lap of His mother, in different parts of the world.

In Germany this picture was known as "Vesperbild (Evening picture)". The statues were relatively small and were carved out of wood. The pictures of the event became popular in Italy and France since the 14th century. Mary was shown as an old woman and the body of Jesus covered with wounds. It was a realistic representation.

However, in the statue of Michael Angelo, Mary is portrayed as a beautiful young woman and the body of Jesus also is made to look handsome. Youthfulness and beauty were interpreted as the grace Mother Mary received through her virginity, and by her being the Mother of God. But, as we have already noted, there is no reference to the event in the Bible.

## Is PIETA a Real Event?

'PIETA' is an Italian word that means devotion or sympathy. Both these meanings could be easily

applied to the statue as those who see it will be moved with devotion and pity. But again, as some people will say, there is no mention of the event in the Bible. The Gospels do not say anything about the body of Jesus being laid in the lap of His mother

How do we respond? Since the body had to be buried before the Sabbath began, everything was done in a hurry. Gospels could not have recorded all the details of whatever might have happened. After all, the Gospels were written for didactic purpose, and not for capturing all the minute aspects of Christ's life. There could be many things a reader may wish to know about Jesus but the details may not be found in the Gospels.

The main aim of the Gospels was to proclaim the salvation God made available through Jesus Christ. The Evangelists might not have given much importance to such events like the PIETA as they would not have considered them essential for their purpose. This does not mean that such a thing did not happen.

## The Portrayal of Jesus

There is also a bit of controversy about the statue PIETA itself. Those who are critical of the portrayal, point out that the body of Jesus is made to look very small, much smaller than it would have actually been. Was it because it is difficult to place an adult man's body in the lap of a woman? The comment is valid. We just wish to say that the statue was sculpted based on the imagination of the artist.

It is said that some years after sculpting the PIETA, Michael Angelo sculpted yet another Pieta,

let us call it Pieta-2, in which half of the body of Jesus is shown to be lying on the floor. In this portrayal, Joseph of Arimathea is seen trying to lift the body into his lap.

Such depictions were common in Germany. In addition, there had been other portrayals where God the Father was shown holding the body of the Son in His lap and the Holy Spirit was shown hovering above in the form of a dove. The artists of the day tried to communicate various elements of Faith through such artistic works.

## Way of the Cross

We also need to speak a little about the Way of the Cross. Tradition has it that the disciples visited the places of the passion of Jesus along with the Blessed Mother. Eventually the visit developed into an exercise of devotion. Places from Gethsemane to Golgotha were parts of this devotional visit. In the 4th century Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity as the official religion of Rome and a Church was built on top of the tomb of Jesus. After that, more and more pilgrims began to visit Jerusalem and the holy places.

In the 5th century a Sanctuary was built in Bologna, Italy. The Sanctuary contained several chapels, depicting the various incidents of the Passion of Christ, pictures of the passion procured from various parts of Europe were exhibited there.

Soon enough veneration of the “Stations of the Cross” came to be observed as a devotional prayer.

St. Francis of Assisi, the first person in history to design the manger (where Jesus was said to be born), encouraged the devotion to the Way of the Cross. The Franciscan monks later popularized this devotion all over the world.

In the beginning, the pictures and the statues of the "Stations of the Cross" were placed outside the church. Later they were moved inside. There was no rigid rule which prescribed as to how many stations there can be or should be. In Nuremburg, Germany, there were only seven stations and they were called the "Seven falls of Jesus Christ". In all the seven stations Jesus was shown falling down or lying down on the floor.

In due course, the "Way of the Cross" came to consist of seven to thirty stations. In 1584, a religious priest called Fr. Andricomeus created a Prayer Book for the Way of the Cross, containing prayers for twelve Stations. The prayer book got translated into several languages.

Pope Clement XII, in 1731, suggested the 14 Stations that we observe today. Initially, only the Franciscan churches had the Stations of the Cross officially installed. Later, the practice spread to other churches as well. However, only Franciscan priests were allowed to bless and install the Stations of the Cross in the churches.

In 1862 an order was proclaimed which said that any church could have the Stations of the Cross installed with the permission of the local Bishop. Today we shall find the 14 Stations of the Cross in all

the Catholic Churches. During the season of Lent, the faithful would participate in the veneration of the Stations of the Cross, both individually and as a community. Some Popes have granted the benefit of Indulgences for this devotion.

## St John Paul II and the Way of the Cross

In 1991 St. John Paul II developed a new version of the Way of the Cross based on the Bible. From the traditional 14 Stations, a few Stations, which do not find clear mention in the Bible, were removed and a few new Stations, documented in the Bible, were added. The 14 Stations suggested by Pope John II are:

1. Jesus praying in Gethsemane
2. Judas betrays Jesus and the soldiers arrest him
3. Sanhedrin condemned Jesus to die
4. Peter denies Jesus
5. Pilate condemned Jesus to death
6. The soldiers scourge Jesus and place a crown of thorns on His head
7. Jesus carrying the Cross
8. Simon helps Jesus to carry the cross
9. Jesus meets the women from Jerusalem
10. Jesus is nailed to the cross
11. Jesus promises paradise to the “good thief”
12. Jesus entrusts Mary to John and John to Mary
13. Jesus dying on the cross
14. Jesus is being buried in a tomb.

For reasons unknown, this new version of the Stations of the Cross did not find much favour with the faithful and has not been adopted by them. Almost all the churches across the world are still observing the traditional 14 Stations of the Cross. Incidentally, Pope John Paul II also added five more mysteries, the Luminous Mysteries, to the Rosary. This has found wide acceptance and has become very popular in the Catholic Church

The devotion of the Stations of the Cross led by the Holy Father the Pope, in Rome every year, is very popular among the faithful and receives wide publicity throughout the world. The veneration starts from the Coliseum and ends on the hill of Palatine.

The Stations of the Cross conducted on the mountain pass on the Western Ghats at Thamarasserry in Kerala, South India, is likely to be the longest Way of the Cross in the world in terms of the distance covered during the devotion.

## To Sum Up

There is no denying the fact that the event portrayed in PIETA finds no mention in the Gospels. However, the popular devotion that has developed around this 'event' over a period of time is a strong pointer that the event must have taken place and the story got transmitted orally through the centuries. What is important is not the historicity of the event as such, but the idea the sculptor wants to convey: the sword piercing Mary's heart, and this could be the strongest way of expressing the fact.

## 8

# THE SIN NEVER FORGIVEN

“Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven” (Lk 12, 10). What is the difference between these two assertions? What is the sin against the Holy Spirit? And why is it never forgiven?

All three Synoptic Gospels have recorded that the saying the sins against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (Mt 12, 31-32; Mk 3, 29; Lk 12, 10). While Mathew says “I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Mt 12, 31-32), Mark has recorded: “Truly I tell you; people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never



have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" (Mk 3, 28-29). Luke also has reported a similar saying of Jesus: "And every one who speaks a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven". Among the sins that are forgiven, included are the sins against the Son of man also. Hence, it is essential to find out why the sins against the Son of man will be forgiven but not the sins against Holy Spirit.

### Seriousness of the Sin

Some scholars claim that "The son of man" means just "man", emphasizing the human nature, and it is a usage in Aramaic Bar Nasa. Therefore, what is implied is that the sin committed against man will be forgiven but sins committed against God will not be forgiven. If we consider only what was recorded by Mark alone, this interpretation could be acceptable. But, when we evaluate what Mathew and Luke say about the "Son of Man" it is quite certain that they were not referring to any man but to Jesus Christ, God Incarnate.

Not only that; "sin" is an action committed against God. Even if it is against another human being, it is a violation of the Commandment of God. Therefore, we have to conclude that Jesus did say that the sin committed against the person of Jesus will be forgiven.

Not everybody could understand and accept the Son of God who became man. His humanity stood as a barrier and there was much room for misunderstanding. Those who rejected and condemned Jesus to death might not have realized that they were dealing with the Son of God. Hence, it

is possible that their sins might be forgiven. But, the sin against the Holy Spirit is of a different kind.

In the Gospel of Luke, the reference to the sin against the Holy Spirit is seen in in one of the collection of isolated sayings of Jesus. Hence, without the context, it is difficult to explain the saying. Mark and Mathew present it as part of a discussion about Jesus casting out demons. The Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons with the assistance of the Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Mt 12, 24). Jesus pointed out the folly of this accusation by citing the example of a kingdom divided against itself. “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand” (Mt 12, 22-30; Mk 3, 20-27).

## Wilful Act

The enemies of Jesus turned against him not due to lack of knowledge or any misunderstanding but they deliberately decided to distort the truth. While they knew that Jesus was casting out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit, they falsely accused him of casting out demons with the assistance of the evil spirit, Satan. They knew that it was a downright lie. Their accusation portrayed the Holy Spirit as an evil spirit.

Mark had this to say against the accusers: “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit” (Mk 3, 29-30). Forgiveness of sin is not possible without an awareness of sin, true repentance and the willingness to convert. The source of forgiveness of sin is the Holy Spirit. Rejecting and depicting the Holy Spirit as an evil spirit is a sure sign of a lost soul and an

unrepentant heart. In such a situation, forgiveness becomes impossible, not because God is not willing to forgive but because the sinner is not willing to accept the forgiveness. As long as a person continues in that state, there is no possibility of liberation from sin.

## Rejection of the Faith

Bible has also indicated other situations where forgiveness of sin is not possible. "It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt" (Heb 6, 4-6).

Those who have received the Faith and had known Jesus and then rejected Him and renounced their Faith would find it very hard to repent and to return to the Lord. Since there is no repentance, they cannot receive forgiveness.

The letter to the Hebrews has explained the punishment that a person, who had received the Faith, and then purposefully renounced it, would receive. "If we wilfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries" (Heb 10, 26-27).

Rejecting the Truth after coming to know it is an unforgivable crime. Such people would invite eternal punishment. St. John called it "mortal sin" (1 Jn 5, 16-17). St. Mark says, "whoever blasphemes against the Holy

Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (Mk 3, 29). Those who harden their hearts, reject the truth and renounce the community of the faithful would continue in a state of sin. They are incapable of receiving forgiveness and will receive eternal punishment because they are “guilty of an eternal sin”.

However, there is no sin that will not be forgiven if one acknowledges the sin one has committed, repents and returns to the Lord. For this, a humble spirit and a conversion of heart are required. Therefore, the warning of Jesus is not meant to drive us to a state of despair but should instead motivate us to true repentance and to change of heart.

## To Sum Up

Sin against the Holy Spirit means knowingly and wilfully rejecting God and His message of salvation. It is a sin committed with full knowledge, with full awareness and in full freedom. Such persons wilfully reject God and all that is holy or good. That is the sin against the Holy Spirit. As long as one continues in that state, there is no possibility of salvation or of liberation from sin.

Can we imagine that there could be persons of this kind in the world? There ought to be, or else Christ would not have spoken of such people. This only shows to what depths of folly man can fall. Beware of making any false accusations against anyone or imputing false motives to the actions of others. It looks that it is in such behaviours that the seeds of sins against Holy Spirit find fertile soil.

## 9

# ACCOUNT FOR EVERY CARELESS WORD

“I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Mt 12, 36-37).

This is a very serious warning. Was Jesus saying that we cannot even share a joke? Does a joke fall into the category of a careless word?

This is an intriguing question. If even simple jokes fall into the scope of ‘a careless word’, it is difficult to make sense of Christ’s warning. Having to give an account on the Day of the Judgment is certainly a frightening prospect. Guided by the Bible the Church teaches us that each person would appear before God at the moment of death and present an account of all his doings and would accept the verdict given in accordance with his deeds. Mathew has put out a serious warning that any careless word we utter

could result in our losing eternal life. What does a “careless word” mean? In what connection does Mathew speak of this subject?

## Careless - Meaning

The English adjective word, “careless” is the translation of the Greek word “argos”. It is the negative form of “ergon” which means action. ‘Argos’ grew out of the usage of the word “a-ergos”. The word can be translated as being lazy, being unproductive or spending time doing nothing. The word is also said to mean being useless, being fruitless, and being futile.

As against ‘a-ergos’, the term “argos” has a deeper meaning. It means not only being useless but also being totally against all that is good, being a source of harm and being hurtful to others. It would simply mean conversations that create harmful results. Even if the conversation was not intended to hurt anyone, but if the careless words spoken cause harm to someone, we will have to give an account of it on the Day of Judgment. St. Paul provides some insight about such a sort of life: “They learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say” (1 Tm 5, 13).

## Words – Internal State of a Person

A person’s words reveal his true nature. Jesus has said, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt 12, 34). The words spoken betray a person’s innermost attitudes. One who always sees faults in others and talks about them is likely to be a

negative kind of a person, causing injury, hurt and discouragement. It follows that careless words do not refer to simple harmless jokes but to deliberate damaging talks. If we are guilty of having indulged in any harmful talks, we will have to appear before God and give an account of our actions.

## Background of the Warning

It is important that we analyse the time and the circumstances of the situation when Jesus issued the warning. This will help us to grasp the meaning more accurately. Jesus had given a detailed account of the Good News of the Kingdom of God through the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5, 1-11). He had demonstrated the nature of the Good News in a concrete manner through his ten miracles (Mt 8, 1-9). Jesus had also forewarned the disciples about the difficulties they would have to face while preaching the Good News (Mt 10), the rejection they would have to suffer and the persecutions they would have to endure.

Further, Jesus had provided a hint of what would happen to Him by reminding the disciples about what had happened to John the Baptist. (Mt 11). Then the Evangelist speaks of the accusations the Jewish leaders had brought up against Jesus, specifically the allegation that He had broken the Sabbath, (Mt 12, 1-14). Mathew says: "The Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. When Jesus became aware of this, he departed" (Mt 12, 14-15). These events the evangelist Mathew interprets in the light of the Servant Songs, especially the suffering of the Servant of Yahweh (Mt 12, 15-21).

This is a pointer to the fact that the mission of Jesus in Galilee had come to an end and a new chapter was opening up in his public ministry (Mt 14,13; 15, 21).

It was in this context that Jesus spoke about the danger of using careless words. There were serious conflicts and arguments between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. When common people saw Jesus was casting out demons, they began to wonder if He were the expected Messiah, whereas, the Jewish leaders spoke of Jesus as being an instrument of Satan. It was this baseless and malicious accusation that forced Jesus to issue a strong warning that presenting the Holy Spirit as an evil spirit is a sin that will not be forgiven (Mt 12, 22-32).

Those who deliberately close their eyes to the obvious truth or distort the truth will not receive forgiveness. In support of this teaching Jesus explains that the words we utter reveal what is in our hearts. As we know the tree from the fruit, we can know the person from the words he speaks because the words originate from the fullness of the heart. We have to keep this perspective in mind while discussing the issue of the careless word.

### **What is the Warning about?**

What is being alluded to are not simple, harmless jokes that might promote friendly relations and healthy atmosphere in a group. Rather what is rebuked is the mindless hatred seen in the Jewish leadership towards Jesus. They tried to depict “the works of the Holy Spirit” as the “works of the evil spirits” and to portray Jesus Christ, the Son of God



as a blasphemer and an instrument of Satan. The words reveal the true nature of a person because they originate from a person's heart. That is why Jesus said, "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Mt 12, 37).

Jesus has taught us clearly that all evil emanates from the heart. "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles" (Mt 15, 17-18; Mk 7, 19-20). To be able to speak the right words, our hearts need to be pure. This is what St. James has to say about the use of the tongue: To be able to control one's tongue, one's heart should be controlled. Our desires, our wishes and in short, our lives should be controlled (Jas 3, 1-14).

## To Sum Up

Thoughtless words and imprudent comments have destroyed lives and altered the course of history. We might have inflicted immense pain and caused untold damage to people we have had dealings with, knowingly and unknowingly, by speaking wrongly, arrogantly and causing much pain to the other. Time has come to think about the way we use our words.

Let us consciously avoid words and language which would in any way injure or defame or malign others. This is what "a careless word" is all about according to the teachings of the Bible. St Paul provides the final exhortation: "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone" (Col 4, 6)

# 10

## WHAT BELONGS TO CAESAR

The Pharisees asked Jesus if it was right for them to pay taxes (Mk 12, 13-17). Why such a question? How are we to understand the full meaning of this response? What does belong to Caesar? What does belong to God? How can we decide what belongs to whom?

### The Analysis

This episode has given rise to many arguments and has been interpreted in many different ways. This subject is of relevance not only to the life of the Church but also to the life of any Society. We need to examine closely the question raised by the Pharisees and the response given by Jesus.

All the three Synoptic Gospels narrate the episode without much variation. It is necessary to know what exactly the situation was when the question was raised and what can be the possible

reasons behind their bringing up this issue. We shall also consider what message Jesus intends to convey to us through his response.

After Jesus made His royal entry into Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders confronted Him with many questions, not for the sake of understanding but to trick him to commit some errors. Wanting to ruin his popularity at all costs, they were looking for some flaws in his conduct. Specifically, they were searching for ways to accuse him of having violated the laws of the land, of the Roman Empire. This way they could mount a criminal case against him that could result in some serious punishment, even death.

The Jewish leaders joined hands with the Herodians, a political party, to question Jesus. "Then, the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said" (Mt 22, 15). The narration of Luke provides a clue to their hidden motives behind the question: "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" (Lk 20, 22). What hypocrisy! Before laying the trap, they had praised Jesus for his honesty and courage. Anyway, what was exactly the trap?

## The Trap

They were expecting a one-word answer "yes" or "no" to their question, but Jesus outsmarted them by providing an unexpected response. When they asked Jesus "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes", they did not really mean the right of the Government to collect taxes and the obligation of the citizens to pay the taxes. Rather their real question was whether it was right for the Jewish people to pay taxes to the

Romans. The focus of the discussion was not the Roman law but the laws of the Jews. Obviously, it was a very loaded question put to trap Jesus as it carried both political and religious overtones.

God had liberated the People of Israel from slavery in Egypt and then from Babylonian captivity. Their common belief was that they should not anymore be slaves to any other power. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect" (Lv 26, 13). If the very people liberated by God are obliged to pay taxes, then it is clearly a sign of slavery. Should they, therefore, refuse to pay taxes? That was the issue contained in the question.

Whatever answer Jesus might give, He was sure to get into trouble. If he would say that it was not lawful to pay taxes, he could be accused of speaking against the authority of the Romans. This might even result in his getting arrested and convicted. If he would say that it was lawful to pay taxes, he could be accused of speaking against the Jewish laws and the popular sentiments. This would mean that He could not be regarded as the Saviour. What is more, the Jews could portray Him as an agent of the Romans, hurl insults on Him and tarnish his reputation. He could also be painted as a "false prophet", who violated the laws of God. Either way, Jesus could find himself on the wrong side of the Law, running the risk of getting convicted and awarded some serious punishment, even death. So, we can see that it was a trap, very carefully laid out.

## Jesus' Response

Jesus did not give a direct answer. He employed an approach which made the very persons, who questioned Him, to give the answer. Jesus asked them to show a coin that was used to pay the taxes. They showed him a Roman coin. Jesus asked them, "Whose portrait is this? Whose title?" (Mk 12, 16).

What is the purpose of this question? All those who keep the Roman coins with the portrait of Caesar, and use them for business, implicitly approve of the authority of Caesar. By their very action they have approved of the Roman supremacy and have also accepted their obligation to pay taxes to Rome. The inner reality of their attitudes was made clear to them by Jesus through his response, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar". But this is not the end of the story.

With the second part of His response, Jesus called their attention to a territory they never expected: "Give to God what belongs to God". Jesus wanted everyone to bear in mind that our first loyalty should always be to God Almighty and we have to ensure that we fulfil all our duties and obligations towards Him first. "Give to God what belongs to God". What is it that belongs to God? Or rather what is that does not belong to God? It was the deep rooted faith of the people of Israel that the entire universe and everything in it belong to God. This teaching is found all through the Bible, from its first verse to the last: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1, 1). This clearly implies that the Universe and everything in it belongs to God. We

may therefore ask: “Is there anything that does not belong to God?” If everything belongs to God, then what is there that can belong to Caesar?

The question Jesus put to the Pharisees was direct and simple. “Whose head and whose title does it bear?” (Lk 20, 22). “Whose head and whose title” refer literally to the image and the title, not to the material on which they were inscribed. Therefore, it can legitimately be concluded that Jesus meant to say that it was fine to pay taxes to Caesar as the Jews have implicitly accepted his authority and rule by transacting regularly with the Roman coins.

However, the dialogue can be interpreted in some other way if the intention is to land Jesus into trouble. One could argue as though Jesus had said that just because someone’s name is inscribed on something, it would not automatically belong to that person. Hence, the hidden message of Jesus was that since the image and the title of Caesar are inscribed on the metal that belongs to God, the coin should be returned to God. Therefore, the underlying message of Jesus is that Caesar has no right to collect taxes and that the Jews have no obligation to pay it. The Jews could easily argue this way to make a case against Jesus.

In fact, that is exactly what they did some time later in the court of Pontius Pilate. Indeed, when Jesus was brought before Pilate, “They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Christ, a king” (Lk 23, 2). Though it was a false accusation, the teachings

and the life style of Jesus made the accusation sound plausible.

All the accusations they brought up against Jesus before the Roman court were entirely political in nature. The Roman Procurator, Pilate, eventually condemned Jesus to death on the ground that he was a revolutionary who led a revolt against Rome. He was crucified having been accused of claiming to be the King of the Jews. On either side of his Cross, they crucified two other revolutionaries. In 'the trial by the people' the man held out against Jesus was Barabbas, a notorious bandit, in fact an insurrectionist. Getting Jesus clubbed with other political prisoners helped the Jews to get Jesus tried as a political convict, which is exactly what they wanted.

## God is the Ultimate Power

From all that has been said, one thing is clear. Jesus taught the Jews that before worrying about whether taxes should be paid to Caesar or not, they are to bear in mind that even Emperor Caesar was a creature of God. In God's plan, there is room for political structures and for the exercise of political power. However, everyone, including Caesar, should be mindful of the fact that God is the ultimate authority. When Caesar refuses to accept and submit himself to the supreme authority of God, then Caesar himself loses his authority as well.

This teaching has great relevance at all times, especially today when secular and atheistic ideologies are dominating the world on the one hand, while on the other religious fanaticism and religious

terrorism are gaining strength. Political parties and leaders who claim absolute authority, without accepting God and His laws inscribed in the nature and the human conscience will not be beneficial to humanity at large, nor do they have any right to exist. On the other hand, religious fanatics who try in God's name to dominate every sphere of human life and rule the world according to their biased, radical and intolerant religious understanding will only destroy human freedom and human society at the end.

## To Sum Up

We have to submit to legitimate political powers and to adhere to the laws of the land, especially with regard to taxation and other such provisions, which are meant to maintain order, social harmony and the upkeep of public services. Citizens have to work to safeguard the larger interests of the society so long as they get to be allowed to lead their private life in the ways they choose to. Christ's message is that we should readily "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" while also ensuring that we give "to God fully what belongs to God".



# 11

## TELL THAT FOX

Jesus referred to King Herod as a “fox”, when He came to hear that Herod had ordered him to leave Galilee or to risk his life. “Some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you”. He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow,... and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem” (Lk 13, 31-33).

What does this mean? Does it mean that we are not to submit to the power of the king, to the legitimate political authority? Jesus seemed to exhibit a similar hostile stance against the Roman authority also when he told Pilate: “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin” (Jn 19,11). Is it all correct?

The issue is all about Jesus’ attitude to the political authority. What is the teaching of the Bible? How should we interpret the Biblical teachings?

The basic teaching, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” is valid at all times. Total submission is to be given only to God and to His revealed plan. The political authority should be seen as part of the overall plan of God and we have, no doubt, to submit to it as well. There might be times when the political powers operate against God and His plan. If that happens what attitude we should adopt is taught to us in the episode under discussion.

### King Herod Antipas

Father of Herod Antipas, King Herod had appointed Antipas as the ruler of Galilee and the Roman Senate had approved the appointment. The people, however, hated him for his immoral life. He had married the princess of the neighbouring country, Nabathea; but while on a visit to Rome, he fell in love with his half-brother Philip’s wife, Herodias and married her. Seeing this as a violation of marriage contract, King Aretas of Nabathea was getting preparing for a war. .

It was during this time that John the Baptist arrived on the scene and rebuked Herod Antipas for committing adultery by marrying his brother’s wife. Fearing that the open conflict with John could lead to a civil war, Herod had him killed eventually. Shortly thereafter Jesus showed up with a much bigger following and much greater popularity than that of John. Herod would have liked to get rid of Jesus as well. But he feared that if he did, it might result in a serious unrest among the people. This was the reason why Herod chose to ask Jesus to leave the area.

The Pharisees seemed to have acted on the direction of Herod, "Some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you" (Lk 13, 31). It was as a reaction to this advice that Jesus called Herod a "fox".

Fox is regarded as a symbol of fear and crookedness. Jesus' angry outburst was more of a censure against crookedness, and was not intended as an insult or a cry of revolt. Jesus declared that it was not for the king to decide what he should or should not do but for God the Father. He was willing to die for this stand of his. However, Jesus declared that His death would occur only at a time and place that the Father decides.

### Limits of Political Power

The lesson Jesus gives us is that we are not to submit to a ruler if he were to force us to do anything against the will of God. For example, the commandment "Do not kill" involves protecting the life of all the people. We cannot let anyone, especially the innocent get killed for any reason whatsoever.

For the purpose of population control or for other reasons of convenience, we are not to allow or condone the abortion of the unborn. There is no obligation to obey such kind of political directives. In fact, obeying such immoral instructions will amount to committing a serious offence against God.

Jesus adopted a similar attitude towards the Roman Procurator also. When Pontius Pilate asked to him: "Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you? Jesus answered him,

“You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin” (Jn 19,10-11). It is God who gave power to Pilate and Caesar and that was the only reason Pilate had power over Jesus. This is true in respect of all the political rulers in the world.

### **Legitimate Authority is to be obeyed**

God is the supreme authority. As part of the Divine plan, power is made available to the leaders to work for the wellbeing of the people and to maintain harmony in the society. The leaders are to be respected and obeyed by the people. The faithful have an obligation to pray for them.

It was God who appointed Moses and the 70 elders to help him (Nm 11, 16-30; Ex 18, 13-27). The leaders that followed, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and the kings were also appointed by God. But no one was given any license to behave in an autocratic fashion, defying God’s Laws. They were to use the power for the good of the people, submitting themselves to God’s sovereign authority.

Kings who ruled in a manner contrary to the will of God invariably turned out to be corrupt and unjust. God sent bold prophets to warn them to mend their ways and, in some cases, to have them even replaced. When we study the history of the Old Testament and the life of the Prophets from Nathan to John the Baptist, we can sense the simmering conflict between the demands of God’s precepts and the whimsical behaviours of the rulers.

Nathan who pointed an accusing finger at King David said, “You are the man!” and rebuked him for

committing adultery and then murder to cover it up, warned him of the punishment God had pronounced on him (2 Sam 12, 1-12). Elijah too pronounced death sentence on King Ahab in the vineyard of Naboth (1 Kings 21). Later Amos proclaimed punishment to King Jeroboam II (Am7, 10-17). These are just a few of the examples of the serious confrontation between the Kings and the Prophets. The teaching of the Apostles shows that such conflicts existed in the early Church as well.

### Exhortation of St Paul

St Paul exhorts us all to show respect to legitimate authority. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment....for it is God's servant for your good.... Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them- taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due" (Rom 13, 1-7). What St Paul says about the Roman authority applies to all the legitimate authority at all times. By addressing the gentile authority as "God's servant", St Paul was following the prophetic tradition.

Isaiah proclaimed that God chose King Cyrus of Persia to bring freedom to the people of Israel who lived in slavery in Babylon. "Thus, says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped

to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes... so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen... let the earth open, that salvation may spring up, and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also; I the Lord have created it” (Is 45, 1-7).

The Apostles exhorted their people not only to obey the authority but also to pray for them. “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tm 2,1-2).

After appointing Titus as the Bishop of Crete, St. Paul asked him to remind the people to remain submissive to the authority. “Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work” (Ti 3, 1). St. Peter also instructed the people to obey the authority, “Accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors” (1 Pt 2, 13-14).

All these exhortations clearly show that neither Jesus nor His disciples advocated anarchy or chaos by disrespecting the political rulers. Rather Jesus approved of the political authority as a necessary institution to maintain peace and order in the society. Therefore, people should respect and obey all those in positions of authority and should also pray for them.

## The Book of Revelation

However, we see a different attitude in the book of Revelation. This book was written when the

faithful were enduring severe religious persecution unleashed by Emperor. In this book, the king and the people in power are portrayed not as the anointed of the Lord but as the instruments of Satan. The message is conveyed through a symbolic language. There may be a slight exaggeration, but we cannot fail to notice that the Roman Emperor was depicted as a satanic power and the author of Revelation exhorted the faithful to oppose him, to resist him with all their might, even unto death.

There is no doubt that the beasts and the whore depicted in Rev. 13 and 17 represented the Roman Emperor. "I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads" (Rev. 13, 1); "Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon" (Rev. 13, 11); and "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations. And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus" (Rev. 17, 5-6). The faithful must not submit to this evil authority but resist them even to the point of death.

## The Right Attitude

All these exhortations give us a clear idea as to what sort of attitude the faithful should have towards the political authority. As a rule, we are to view the worldly authority as servants of God, and we must obey them and pray for them. But if they try to assume the place of God, promulgate laws that are against the commands of God, and force people to obey them then the faithful should resist them. People should even be willing to die to uphold their loyalty to God.

The history of the Church has a long list of martyrs who sacrificed their lives to uphold their faith. Even in recent times, in Hitler's Germany, in Stalin's Russia, in Mao's China and, as of today, in the Middle East under the rule of the Islamic (ISS) terrorists, thousands of people have chosen to die rather than to compromise with their Christian Faith. They took a firm stand against the Satanic powers and willingly sacrificed their lives in defence of their Faith. They are the modern-day role models for all Christians to follow. They have taught us how we have to deal with the hostile political powers.

## To Sum Up

Our Faith exhorts us to respect and to obey the legitimate political authority. We are also called upon to pray for them. But our Faith does not advocate blind submission to any power, especially if it is proved to be corrupt, atheistic, divisive and self-serving. Rather our Faith exhorts us to stand up for the truth and for justice, and even be willing to die, should the necessity arise.

This is not always easy to do. There is a very thin line separating the good and the bad among those who exercise political or even religious powers. There is also a risk of considering one's point of view, maybe erroneous and faulty, as valid and true and regarding the view of the authority, which maybe legitimate and right, to be wrong. So, we are treading on dangerous grounds. We need to go slow in jumping to conclusions. Always, give the other person the benefit of doubt first.



## 12

# HAVE THE DEAD RISEN?

Several incidents reported by St. Mathew in connection with the death of Jesus are difficult to understand, especially the statement: "The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many" (Mt 27, 52-53). Quite a puzzling account! Because the Church's teaching has always been that the resurrection would happen only at the end of the world. Then how are we to understand this resurrection of the dead at the time of Jesus' death? That apart, the reported incident gives rise to many other questions. When did the dead saints rise? What seems to be said by the Evangelist is that they rose from the tombs when Jesus died. If so, where were they from the time Jesus died until the time of his resurrection? Did the dead saints come out of the tombs before the resurrection of Jesus? If so, what kind of body did they have? If they entered the city,

couldn't everybody see them? Why did they appear only to a few? We have to embark on a detailed study of the passage to find the answers.

## Meaning of the 7 Miracles

True, it is a very puzzling statement. In order to find an answer to these questions, we have to see the context in which it is reported, the literary form used and the purpose intended by the evangelist. In fact, St. Mathew has mentioned seven miracles in connection with the death of Jesus: 1. Darkness covered the face of the earth for three hours, from the sixth hour to the ninth hour 2. The curtain of the temple was torn into two, from top to bottom. 3. The earth shook. 4. The rocks were split. 5. The tombs were opened. 6. The bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 7. After Jesus' resurrection, they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

Of these seven miracles, the other two synoptic gospels, Mark and Luke report two, namely the darkness over the earth and the tearing of the temple veil (Mk 15,33.38; Lk 23,44-45). It is worth noting that none of these miracles has been reported by the Evangelist John. That is not to say that they did not happen. However it is striking to note that Mathew has reported seven incidents, and it is quite reasonable to assume that he is trying to convey something by this. What is the Evangelist trying to convey to us? Seven is a symbolic number. It denotes fullness and completion. Hence it is quite probable that message of Mathew points to the fullness of salvation achieved through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

“The darkness over the face of the earth and the curtain in the Temple getting torn from top to bottom” are the two events that all the three Synoptic Gospels have recorded. Both the events have evidently a symbolic meaning.

## Darkness at Noon

Prophets regarded darkness at noon as a sign of God coming to judge. It was Amos who used such an image for the first time. “On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight” (Am 8, 9). The prophet had warned that on the Day of the Lord, there will be darkness instead of the blessing they expected. “Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light” (Am 5, 18). The prophets who came after Amos also used the same imagery (Is 59, 9-10; Mic 12, 3-5; Jer 13, 16. 19, 9; Ezek 32, 7).

Darkness at noon signifies that the day of the Lord has come. God has pronounced the judgment. The specification of the Evangelist that darkness fell on the face of the earth, right before Jesus died, should be seen as a sign that God had pronounced His judgment over the earth.

The political and the religious courts of the day had condemned an innocent person to death and had Him crucified. Those present at Calvary challenged Him to come down from the cross, though He did not. It seemed as if the Father too had abandoned Jesus. But with darkness over the earth, God had pronounced His judgment. Those who crucified

the “Light of the World” were the cause of bringing darkness into their own world.

## The Curtain

“The curtain of the temple was torn into two, from top to bottom”. This was yet another symbolic event. Tearing something from top to bottom is an act of judgment. Upon hearing a blasphemy, the High Priest tore his cape which was equivalent to pronouncing death sentence on a person (Mt 26, 65). The curtain of the Temple that separates the Holy of Holies from the rest of the area was torn from top to bottom. It was an act of God. It was an indication that a decisive Divine intervention had taken place.

The importance of the Temple of Jerusalem as the House of God has ended. In the place of the Temple built by human hands, God has built a new one. The body of Jesus who was crucified and killed on the Cross is that new Temple. Through the resurrection, all will come to know who the new “Temple” is.

The curtain that separates the Holy of Holies also lost its significance. God became visible in Jesus Christ who was crucified outside the city. The Holy of Holies where only the High Priest entered once a year has been thrown open to all. The Holy of Holies, which was the symbol of Heaven, is no more located in the dark hole of the Temple but on the Cross, erected high on Golgotha. Tearing of the curtain marked the end of the old covenant and the beginning of the new.

All these were acts of God. This is the overall message contained in all the three Synoptic Gospels.

## Miracles reported by only by Mathew

Next, we turn to the account of the miracles solely reported by the Evangelist Mathew. The first event relates to the fact that the “earth shook” when Jesus breathed his last. In the teaching of Jesus himself, earthquake was shown as a sign of the end of the world. “There will be famines and earthquakes in various places” (Mt 24, 7). Mathew has mentioned that at the time of Jesus’ resurrection the earth shook: “And suddenly there was a great earthquake” (Mt 28, 2).

In the books of the Prophets, earthquake was often presented as a sign of God coming down to judge the world (Is 24, 19; 29, 6; Jer 10, 10; Ps 18, 7; 97, 4). It is said that the rocks split as a result of the earthquake, which points to God’s coming. In short, God has pronounced His judgment over this world. If the torn curtain in the Temple was the sign of judgment over the Temple, the earthquake was the sign of God pronouncing His judgment over the universe, which was mired in sin. This judgment marked the end of the old covenant and the fulfilment of Salvation History in Jesus Christ.

There are adequate proofs that ‘the tearing of the curtain and the earthquake were historical events. On Golgotha where Jesus was crucified, the rock, near where the Cross stood, was split, and this can be seen even today. The tombs might have been thrown open due to the impact of the earthquake. The stone at the face of the tomb where Jesus was buried was rolled back, not for Jesus come out, but for the people to see that it was empty. The empty tomb was the

proof of the resurrection of Jesus. These events could stand the tests of historical scrutiny. But there is no clarity about two other issues

## Resurrection of the Dead

The Bible says that the resurrection of the dead would take place at the end of the world. "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (1 Cor 15, 20-23). These Biblical accounts clearly indicate that before Jesus, no one had resurrected and the resurrection of the dead would happen only at the end of the world.

Here is St Paul's unequivocal message: "For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.... When this perishable body puts on imperishability, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor 15, 52-54). "With the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thes 4, 13-18). This is the firm belief of the Christians. Nowhere in the Bible has it been said that the dead have come back to life. The raising of the dead by

Jesus, for example the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow at Nain and of Lazarus, are resuscitations, not resurrection, meaning they were brought back to the natural, perishable life that was extended for some more time and therefore are quite different from resurrection. Hence bible scholars hold that the words of St. Mathew should not be taken literally.

If resurrection of the bodies is part of the Eschatological event, the narration that bodies came out of the tombs at the time of the death of Christ, should be regarded only as a symbolic message. With the death of Jesus, humanity is freed from the dominion of death. The tombs that symbolized eternal imprisonment were opened to show that nothing, not even death, has dominion over human beings.

### The Dead appeared in the city

The account that after the resurrection of Jesus, many of the dead, appeared in the city should be regarded as a vision, requiring no physical presence. Many seem to have had visions of saints and souls in purgatory. But none of them is reported to have come out of the tomb. St. Mathew might have been talking about such visions. More important is the truth communicated through these accounts.

The death and resurrection of Jesus should be viewed together as two sides of the same coin. They mark the end of the old age that was under the dominion of sin, and the start of the new age. "Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out- those who have done good, to

the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (Jn 5, 28-29). St. Mathew has presented this teaching in an apocalyptic language. The resurrection of the dead that was vaguely seen by the prophets is presented in a symbolic manner.

All these show that we are not to interpret all the writings in the Bible literally. We should attend to literary genre used and try to probe deeper to get the message intended by the sacred author. This is also true of the biblical accounts about the creation of the universe (Gen 1, 2) and of the heaven (Rev 4, 1-11; 21, 1-22; 5).

## To Sum Up

Literally and figuratively, the Resurrection of Jesus was an earth-shaking event. Little wonder, the earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs were opened. There is little to be surprised about these events. After all, the God of the Universe was the central Figure in the Resurrection Miracle. He was directly involved.

However, the narrations about the dead saints being raised from the tombs and then thereafter, after the Resurrection of Jesus, their appearing to the faithful need to be interpreted, not literally, but as symbolic messages. The aim of the narration was to emphasize the decisive nature of Jesus’ Resurrection, which marks a great new beginning in the story of humankind.



# 13

## DOES A MUSTARD SEED BECOME A TREE?

In the parable of the Mustard Seed which Jesus used to explain the Kingdom of God there seem to be two major errors, giving rise to the following questions:

1. Is mustard seed really the smallest seed? There are indeed other seeds smaller than the mustard seed.
2. Could the mustard seed become a tree and grow to such a size that the birds could build nests on its branches?

When seen from one angle, it would seem as though Jesus made a mistake in choosing the mustard seed for his parable. Let us bear in mind that the reference to the mustard seed as part of the parable is not to be viewed as a lesson in Botany. It is a parable used to teach about the Kingdom of God.

In the parable narratives, we might find slight exaggerations. However, that would not materially affect the basic message of the parable. In the parable under review, we have to take into account the prevailing thinking in the society about the mustard seed and the point highlighted by Jesus.

## Mustard Seed

There were many popular sayings about the mustard seed in the Jewish society. When required to prove the purity of blood, they used to say, "It is enough to have blood in the size of a mustard seed". Likewise, to emphasize the seriousness of even minor violations of the law, they used to say, "Breaking the law in the size of a mustard seed". Mustard seed seemed to have symbolized the smallest. Of course, there are those who may argue that certain types of Spinach and the Bunyan trees have smaller seeds. This might be true. Some scholars claim that Jesus had actually said "Bunyan tree" but those who translated the text altered it to mustard seed. However, since there were no Bunyan trees in Palestine at that time, there is hardly any likelihood that Jesus would have had that tree in mind.

Speaking about the mustard seed, there is a difference in size between the mustard seed commonly found in India and the mustard seed popular in the Jewish society at the time of Jesus. The size of the mustard seed in Palestine was much smaller than the mustard seed we have in India. Possibly people of that time in Israel, could not think of any other seed smaller than the mustard seed. Besides, as we have already noted, in the Palestine region, the mustard seed was used as an example of the smallest seed.

## Mustard Plant

As for the mustard plant in Palestine, the plant grows to a height of about 10-12 feet and becomes a sturdy tree with branches. Though it may not be as big as a Mango tree or a Jack fruit tree, it was large enough to qualify to be a tree. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Mt 13, 31-32).

When the trees have produced fruits, the birds would come to feast on them. This was true about the mustard plant also. Jesus might have referred to such a fruitful tree while narrating his parable. So, there is little or no reason to conclude that Jesus committed a mistake in choosing the mustard seed for his illustration in the parable.

## Kingdom of God

What was Jesus trying to communicate through this parable is more to the point. The central theme of the parable is the great growth attained from a small beginning. The Kingdom of God too would grow huge rapidly in the world just as the mustard seed becomes a tree within a short time.

The son of a carpenter, and himself a carpenter hailing from a little-known town of Nazareth, started a community with a few fishermen. For the leading people of the society of that time, this little band would have seemed hardly worth a thought. It is

possible that even the disciples of Jesus would not have thought much of themselves.

But Jesus assured them that as the mustard seed grows into a big tree, this little community of people of the Kingdom of God would become a powerful group of witnesses to God on earth. The Kingdom of God would not be restricted to the region of Galilee but will spread to the ends of the earth. This was the intended message of the parable.

## Trees as Symbols

While speaking of trees, we would remember of many other trees which are held out as symbols in the Bible. For example, Prophet Ezekiel portrays Egypt as a Cedar of Lebanon. “The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, say to Pharaoh King of Egypt and to his hordes: Whom are you like in your greatness? Consider Assyria, a cedar of Lebanon, with fair branches and forest shade, and of great height, its top among the clouds....All the birds of the air made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the animals of the field gave birth to their young; and in its shade all great nations lived.... I made it beautiful with its mass of branches, the envy of all the trees of Eden that were in the garden of God” (Eze 31, 1-9). In a dream, King Nebuchadnezzar saw a similar tree: “Upon my bed this is what I saw; there was a tree at the centre of the earth, and its height was great....the birds of the air nested in its branches, and from it all living beings were fed” (Dn 4, 10-12).

A tree in which birds of the air rested and nested was a symbol of a great empire. The Kingdom of God

that Jesus proclaimed embraces all the people of the world. It is open to all and anyone could take refuge in it. This was the very truth highlighted in the parable.

## Growth from Within

The seed grows from within. Even as a seed takes in light and water from outside, it is its internal energy that makes the seed grow. Just as the mustard tree grows fast, the Kingdom of God would grow fast too, and would attract all the people of the world. It is God who makes it grow. Within twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Kingdom of God had spread to all the four corners of the world. Large numbers of people accepted the Gospel message and sought refuge in the Kingdom of God.

## Mustard Seed Again

There is yet another occasion where Jesus used the symbol of the mustard seed. It was while teaching about the importance of Faith. Mathew writes: "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Mt 17, 20).

With a little variation, Luke said the same thing, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you" (Lk 17, 6). Jesus taught us that with faith we can surmount any obstacle. Here also the mustard seed is used as a symbol of the smallest quantity.

The mustard seed is not only small but also strong and sturdy. The followers of Jesus must have faith and their faith should be as strong and sturdy as the mustard seed. Believing in God signifies total surrender in the hands of God. Those who take refuge in God will be protected by God. Nothing will be impossible for them. For a person of faith, obstacles even as huge as a high mountain would disappear, just as the sea parted into two to create a passage for the Israelites.

## To Sum Up

Reference to the “mustard seed” is found only in the two places in the Bible that we have reviewed. In both the places, the mustard seed is used to signify the smallest with regard to size and to quantity. This was very much in line with the prevailing thinking in the Jewish society which tended to regard the mustard seed as the smallest. Anyway, Jesus was not a teacher in Botany, but a spiritual teacher, a story-teller. It is perfectly justified even if He took some liberties in presenting the mustard seed as the smallest known seed in the country.

What is important is that we do not underestimate the power and the potential of people, whether of others or, why not, even of our own. We are also not to underrate our failings dismissing them as minor in nature. ‘Smallness’ can be misleading and we may wake up too late, both to opportunities and to dangers.

# 14

## THE CAMEL AND THE NEEDLE'S EYE

“I tell you; it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19, 24). This teaching of Jesus raises many doubts and many concerns.

Can a camel go through the eye of a needle? Does this mean that the rich will not be able to go to heaven at all? Or does this verse have some other meaning? Could it be a mistake made in the translation? Why should a camel go through a needle's eye at all? What is the meaning of this point?

There is no obvious connection between a camel and the eye of a needle. Why should a camel go through the eye of a needle? Even more significant is the question about the salvation of the rich. All three Synoptic Gospels have captured this affirmation of Jesus without much variation.

A rich young man approached Jesus and asked him what he had to do to be saved. Seeing his desire to become perfect, Jesus told him to donate all his wealth to the poor, and then to come and to follow Him. But the young man did not seem willing to take on such a challenge. It was then that Jesus pronounced his verdict. Here then is the main theme, the salvation of the rich. It may seem as though Jesus rules out the possibility of rich people entering into Heaven.

As the apparent message was not palatable, many of the manuscripts came out with a revised version. They sought to blame the translators. In their view, the mistake had its beginnings in the Greek translation.

The Greek word “Kamel” was translated as Camel. Some think that the Evangelist had written “Kamil” which means a thick rope used in the Ship when anchoring it on the shore. In the Greek language there is a great similarity between “e” and “i” in writing and pronouncing, and it might have been a simple spelling error. In fact it makes more sense to say, “Passing a rope through the eye of a needle”. Some ancient manuscripts also used the term “rope”.

In negation of this view, it has been found that none of the ancient manuscripts had used the word “Kamil”. All of them have used the word “Kamel”. The major manuscripts of the Gospels do not support the attempt to change the camel to a rope. There can be another explanation. Camel is perhaps what was truly intended but ‘the eye of the needle’ is not the ordinary eye of the needle through which we pass a thread.



## The Needle Issue

In those days, many of the towns had two gates. One was big enough for all the loaded vehicles and huge animals to pass through. This gate would be closed at night. But there was another smaller gate for the people to use. It was a narrow gate through which only one person can walk through at a time. This gate was known as “the needle’s eye”. Such an arrangement is common even today both in big institutions and in private homes. Hence, some scholars think that Jesus had this narrow gate in mind when he spoke of the ‘eye of the needle’.

Both these explanations share the same purpose, to eliminate the seeming exaggeration in the utterances of Jesus. Those scholars who suggest a change in the reading would like to make it easier for the rich to enter the Kingdom, by making camel smaller or the needle’s eye bigger. Though the intention may be good, these are not the right interpretations of the words of Jesus. It is more the wishful thinking of those who have offered these explanations to serve their own personal interests.

## The Speck and the Log

If we say that this is an impossible exaggeration from the mouth of Jesus, how can we explain many other similar expressions? “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see

clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Mt 7,3-25). It was again Jesus who said, "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!" (Mt 23, 24). Going one step further Jesus spoke about those who swallow the homes of the widows. "They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation" (Mk 12, 40).

With the parable of the speck and log, Jesus is trying to drive home the point of having to correct ourselves first before we attempt to correct others. The Greek word used for "log" was "dokos" which meant the beam that supports the roof. How can such a beam sit in a person's eye? All these show the peculiarities of the way Jesus spoke. Therefore, there is no justification whatsoever in trying to make the camel smaller and the eye of the needle bigger. These are nothing but blatant attempts at justifying our mistaken notions and personal preferences.

## Wealth and Wealthy People

What then was Jesus trying to teach? Did he really mean that the rich cannot be saved? To understand this verse, we have to study the teachings of the Bible in general and the teachings of Jesus in particular, about wealth and wealthy people. Though a detailed study is not possible here, a few observations may be in order.

God created this universe and everything in it for all the creatures in the world (Gen 1, 26-31). It is to ensure life and growth for all that the precepts of the Covenant were given (Ex 20, 23). If

some people accumulate for themselves all that belongs to all, it is against the plan of God. With this basic understanding, we should look at the severe criticisms of the rich by the prophets (Is 1, 16-18; 5, 8-25; 10, 1-2; Amos 4, 1-2; 2, 6; Ezek 22, 12).

Prophet Jeremiah presents, as it were, a summary of the teachings of the Old Testament with regard to wealth when he says, "Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich,... they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy" (Jer 5, 27-28). Jeremiah seems to say that there is an evil side to wealth which means that the rich accumulate wealth through unfair means and they do not share it with the poor. This view becomes clearer and stronger in the New Testament

## New Testament on Wealth

St. Paul writes: "Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains" (1 Tim 6, 9-10).

The warning given by St. James was more severe: "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you....You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have

reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter” (Jas 5, 1-6).

The teachings in the epistles are merely an elaboration of the teachings of Jesus. The basic teaching of Jesus about wealth is that wealth is the gratuitous gift of God. No man owns his wealth but wealth has been entrusted to him to safeguard it and to share it with those in need, a deed that will guarantee eternal life to the person. Those who refuse to share their wealth will not enter into heaven.

Jesus demonstrated this truth with the parables of the Foolish Rich Man (Lk 12, 16-21); the Unfaithful Manager (Lk 16, 1-9); and the Rich Man and Lazar (Lk 16, 19-31). Jesus has clearly revealed his mind about the rich and the wealthy through these parables and through his personal life style. His warning is that excessive wealth can become a stumbling block to the rich to enter into the Kingdom of God.

## Summary of Christ's Teachings

1. Wealth provides a person with a false sense of security and encourages him to feel that he is sufficient unto himself. The wealthy tend to distance themselves from God and from other human beings. They do not realize that they could lose all their wealth and the very life in a moment.
2. Wealth tends to make Godless, creating an unbridgeable chasm between man and God, leading to the neglect of God in our lives. That is why Jesus said that one cannot serve God and

Mammon (wealth) at the same time (Lk 16, 13). It was on this ground that greed for money was equated with idolatry (Col 3, 5).

3. Wealth tends to make a man heartless and blind to the sufferings and misery of the poor as witnessed in the parable of the "Rich Man and Lazar". When a poor man was starving to death at his door step, the rich man just ignored his plight and went on enjoying a lavish meal with his family and friends, every day .
4. No matter how much money a person has, he keeps thirsting for more wealth and becomes a victim of greed. Just as salt water does not quench our thirst, no amount of wealth can bring us satisfaction. The wealthy do not realize that they could be losing their lives even as they are building newer and bigger barns. "Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Lk 12, 15).
5. In most cases, wealth gets accumulated not through fair means. This itself is a clear transgression. Unwilling to share our wealth with those who are in need is a sin. Jesus reiterated and supported the teachings in Sirach, "The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood. To take away a neighbour's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood" (Sir 34, 21-22).

Wealth ruins our happiness here on earth and endangers our life eternal. Wealth is a dangerous obsession. For this reason, Jesus said it would be

difficult for a rich man to enter into Heaven. However, all is not lost yet. A solution is in sight. Jesus Himself has proposed it to the rich young man, “Go and sell what you have, give it to the poor and then come and follow me”. The solution lies in sharing our wealth with the poor.

If we are to develop an attitude of sharing, we should realize that wealth would not bring lasting happiness. We must place our trust in the providence of God (Lk 12, 22-34). Jesus has assured us that we can attain eternal life by sharing our money with those in need (Lk 16, 9; Mt 25, 31-40). We are not to forget that we will not be admitted into the Kingdom of God if we are not sensitive to the needs of the poor.

## Sharing our Wealth

The Gospels have reported several incidents of people who have placed their wealth at the service of others. Here are a few notable examples: Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus in his own tomb. Nicodemus came along with one hundred pounds worth of a mixture of myrrh and aloes and placed them in the tomb along with the body of Jesus (Jn 19,38-39); Martha and Mary had always kept the doors of their house open for Jesus and the disciples (Lk 10, 38).

Mary anointed Jesus with a very expensive perfume without any hesitation (Jn 12, 3). Peter readily abandoned his boat, net and house to follow Jesus (Lk 5, 1-11; 18, 28); Other Apostles too left everything they had to be with Jesus. The women referred to in the Gospels had all without exception served Jesus and His disciples generously with their

wealth (Lk 8, 3). The Bible speaks of several other rich people who happily shared their possessions with those in need and, in the process, made themselves worthy of entry into the Kingdom of God.

## Zacchaeus

A notable example of a rich man who managed, so it appears, to pass “through ‘the eye of the needle’” is Zacchaeus. Jesus and the disciples were passing through Jericho on their way to Jerusalem. St Luke writes: “There was a man named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was. He had climbed up a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today....‘Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold’. And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house’ ... the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost” (Lk 19, 1-10).

While giving directions to Timothy, Paul told him to instruct the rich: “Not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, liberal and generous, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed” (1 Tim 6, 17-19).

## To Sum Up

Jesus did not say that it is impossible for the rich to enter Heaven but only said that it is difficult. Jesus may have conveyed this message in an

exaggerated fashion by saying that it is equivalent to a camel passing through the eye of the needle. The camel represents the biggest animal and the eye of the needle the smallest hole. The apparent contrast between the two is the very essence of the message. All this was done to highlight the challenge the rich face in dealing with their wealth, while having their sights firmly fixed on the life to come, the life eternal.

Increasingly we are also realizing the significance and the duty of wealth in creation. We have obligations to serve the material needs of people. Wealth earned fairly, and then used wisely is as much a virtuous act as prayer and penance, especially if many others stand to benefit from our efforts of creating wealth.



# 15

## LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Jesus has taught us: “Love your enemies”. But, strangely, Jesus Himself has on several occasions showered curses on the Jewish Leaders who opposed him and conspired to kill him. He had shouted at them and said to them: “Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!”(Mt 23, 13-16).

How can these angry out bursts be reconciled with His teaching “Love your enemies”? Was it that Jesus changed His mind with the passage of time as the opposition grew stronger?

Do we have to say that Jesus was not true to His words when it came to His actions? Such a conclusion is far removed from the image of Jesus we have from the Gospel story. We require a calm, cool thinking, a dispassionate analysis.

Two issues call for discussion. First, the teaching of Jesus, “Love your enemies”. And second, His harsh rebuke of the Jewish leaders. We shall discuss the first issue in this chapter. .

Before we do, it may be worth mentioning that Jesus had used such harsh language like “Woe to you” not only towards the end of his public life but in the early part of his ministry as well. A relevant example would be His admonitions in the “Sermon on the Mount” (Lk 6, 20-26). So, the question of whether Jesus changed his mind over a period of time does not arise. He was what He was with the Jewish leaders all through His life.

## Four Types of Love

“Love your enemies” is part of the teachings of Jesus contained in St. Mathew’s account of the “Sermon on the Mount”(Mt 5-7). The Sermon on the Mount is rightly regarded as the summary of the Good News of the Kingdom of God (Mt 5, 38-48).

The command “Love your enemies” is also found in the Gospel of St Luke (Lk 6, 27-36). Luke has reported this exhortation twice as part of a long discourse (Lk 6, 27-38). What is intended by the command “Love your enemies”?

The entire New Testament, including the Gospels, was first written in Greek. In Greek four different words are used to denote “love”.

1. **Ero (verb) and Eros (noun):** This refers to the kind of passionate love seen in a marital relationship, between a husband and a wife or between any two people deeply in love. Love (ero) in this context connotes an emotion involving physical relationship. This is not the word Jesus used. In fact, this word is never found in the New

Testament. So, this is not the kind of love Jesus had in mind.

2. **Stergo (verb) and Sterge (noun):** This refers to the kind of love we find in parents towards their children. This could also be termed as affection. This word again is not found in the New Testament. Obviously, Jesus did not advocate this kind of affection either when he commanded us “to love your enemies”.
3. **Phileo (verb) and Philia (noun):** This is the kind of love that friends exhibit towards each other. It is also called as friendship. The verbal form of this word appears in 24 places in the New Testament, 12 of these in the Gospel of John alone. Its noun form is found only once in the NT, in the letter of James (Ja 4, 4). But this is not the word Jesus used when He commanded us to love our enemies.

All the three kinds of love we have reviewed so far refer to love of a normal kind. Though they refer to three different kinds of love, all the three fall in the category of normal human emotions and relationships. Jesus did not use any of these three words; he did not have any of these three kinds of love in mind. The word Jesus used has a totally different meaning. Jesus had a very different kind of love in mind.

4. **Agapao (verb) and Agape (noun):** The verbal form of this word is found 141 times in the New Testament, and its noun form 16 times. It is this word that Jesus used when He commanded us to love our enemies. This is the sort of love God has for us all. This love is not just a normal emotion,

an impulsive feeling but the result of a conscious decision. It is not a spontaneous liking one may have for another. It is not eros, storge or philia.

This kind of love is generally not seen, in fact rarely seen. It is a love that involves total giving without expecting anything in return. Let us analyse what is so special about this love.

## Agape

Luke has given seven examples as an explanation for the word “agape”, leading us to the depth of this love:

1. Do good to those who harm you;
2. Bless those who curse you.
3. Pray for those who insult you.
4. To the one who slaps you on one cheek, show him the other cheek.
5. To those who take your cloak, give your coat also. Do not stop them from taking anything.
6. Give to anyone who asks
7. Do not ask them to return the things they have taken (Lk 6, 27-30).

One thing is clear from these precepts. Jesus commands actions which are beyond our normal human tendencies. The spontaneous act of a man is to slap back one who slaps him, and to curse the one who curses him. We are all born with this normal human instinct, which secures our survival and safety. Indeed, the Precepts of the Old Covenant are founded on this instinct, “You shall give life for life, eye for

eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Ex 21, 23-25; Lv 24,20; Dt 19, 21).

These laws were given so that no one would dare injure or harm another with impunity, without fear of retaliation. While granting the right to retaliatory measures, the precepts place some limits on the extent of the damage you could inflict on another. For example, if someone injures one of your eyes, you can hit back and injure only one of his eyes in return, not both his eyes

## New Testament Teaching – 180 Degree Change

Jesus totally reversed the Old Testament precepts with one big sweep. “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you” (Mt 5, 38-42).

The Old Testament laws were no doubt based on reason and logic, but the precepts of Jesus are founded on a very different understanding and attitude, totally alien to the normal human thinking and to the commonly held beliefs. As God loves all the people unconditionally, we also must learn to love one another unconditionally. It is from this perspective that we have to view the commandment of Jesus, “Love your enemies”.

Jesus does not say that we have to like our enemies or to show the kind of affection parents show towards their children. Far from it, He is asking us to love them as God loves them, without expecting anything in return and wishing them to have the blessings of God. We all know that it is not possible to develop an affectionate feeling towards our enemies. What Jesus demands of us is that we consciously commit to love our enemies, even if it goes against our grain, against our normal human inclinations.

As we can see, this is a very different kind of love, a love that is totally unselfish, the kind of love that expects nothing in return. What is desired is solely the pure good or the wellbeing of the other person, unconcerned about his response. Even if he were to hurt you, or to hate you or to harm you in any way, you would continue to offer him the same kind of love. This love knows no obstacles. This love puts no conditions. This love puts no limits. This is the sort of love God has for us all. Little wonder Jesus said: "Love one another as I have loved you".

### **The First Three Levels of Love**

This love seems to move through different levels. At the first level lies the decision not to hurt the enemy or to take any revenge even if an opportunity comes your way. An example of this level of love is the way David behaved with Saul. Saul had been hunting to kill David but when David got him alone in a cave, he did not hurt Saul (1 Sam 24, 1-7).

At the second level lies the grant of total forgiveness to the enemy. Forgiving does not mean

having to forget the offence. Joseph of the Old Testament is a classic example for this level of love, forgiving love. His brothers had tried to kill him and then sold him as a slave to the Egyptians. Eventually when Joseph was exalted to the highest office in Egypt, he told his brothers: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen 45, 4-5).

Joseph had not forgotten what the brothers had done to him but he did not hate them as he realized that God had worked through them and had used him for a bigger cause. When we learn to realize that whatever happens to us is a part of God's plan, there would be no room for hatred or for revenge. While he forgave Shimei who had insulted him, David demonstrates this sort of forgiving love: "And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, "Behold, my own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite! Let him alone, and let him curse; for the LORD has bidden him. It may be that the LORD will look upon my affliction, and that the LORD will repay me with good for this cursing of me today." (2 Sam 16,11-12).

The third level of loving the enemy is wishing only what is good for the enemy and praying for his wellbeing. Here the person desires not only good for the enemy but sincerely wishes and prays for his absolute good. There is no trace of envy or ill-will about his good fortune, but only joy and happiness about his success. If there were to be a possibility, he would join the enemy in his celebration.

## The 4th Level of Love

The 3 levels of love discussed thus far largely relate to the kind of attitude one should have towards the enemy. The 4th level of love lays emphasis on translating this selfless love and attitude into action. This is done, for instance, by highlighting the good in the enemy; not speaking ill of the enemy would be another characteristic of this level of love. In addition, sincere attempt will be made to establish friendship with him and to help him if he is in need.

Forgiveness, no doubt, has many facets. St Paul expounds an important aspect of forgiveness in his Letter to the Romans: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12, 20-21). ‘Overcome evil with good’ is the underlying message of St Paul. As a matter of fact, the Apostle was restating the teachings of the Old Testament, found in the Book of Proverbs: “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; or you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the LORD will reward you” (pr 25,21-22). In certain ancient manuscripts, instead of “coals of fire” we have “coals of repentance”. This is what St. Paul is asking, love the enemy, praying for him and expressing such kindness to him that he will be moved to repentance and his hatred will melt, as wax in fire. This is the very essence of Christianity. Love every one, as God loves you. Your love should be inclusive, no one should be excluded.



Jesus expects His followers to have an open heart, to love everyone as He loves us. This is the way we become children of God. This is how we get to participate in the perfection of God (Mt 5, 48). Luke defines such an attitude as showing mercy: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6, 36).

## To Sum Up

Jesus forgave the disciple who betrayed Him. He forgave the one who denied knowing Him. He prayed for the Jewish leaders who handed him over to be crucified. He prayed for the soldiers who executed the punishment. Hanging on the Cross, He prayed for all who had done Him harm. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23, 34). What a manifestation of love! "Love your enemies". Who can be a better role model for this command than Jesus Himself?

# 16

## “WOE TO YOU” BY JESUS

Jesus has taught us quite clearly: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Lk 6, 27). However, there were times when Jesus hurled words of curse at the Jewish leaders who rejected Him and tried to get Him out of their way. In fact, he shouted at the Jewish leaders “Woe to you” seven times on a single occasion. (Mt. 23, 13-36). How do we explain these angry outbursts of Jesus?

Often enough, what Jesus says has a meaning different from its usual sense. This could be true also of his behaviour. Some of his actions can also be misinterpreted.

### **Woe to you!**

From one point of view, the phrase “Woe to you” could be seen as a curse. This has to be clarified. Jesus has taught us very clearly: “Love our enemies and do good to those who hate you”. The outburst ‘Woe to you’ is totally out of line with His teachings.

How do we explain this inconsistency in His life? Is there anything about the Biblical language that we are missing out?

In some translations, the word “Woe” is retained but in some it is changed into “How terrible for you” or “Alas!” While the word “Woe” may sound like a curse, the phrase “How terrible or alas” may seem more like an expression of sympathy or a cry of anguish. Therefore, a study of the translations of the biblical texts alone may not be enough to reach any valid conclusion.

### **More a Lamentation**

Greek is the original language of the New Testament. The word used in Greek for “Woe” is “Ouai” which denotes deep sorrow and deep internal conflict. This was actually the translation of the two Hebrew words “oi” and “hoi” which have similar meanings.

The word is found mainly in the speeches of the prophets. This word is found in ten places in Isaiah (5, 8-24). In all the ten places, the word was translated as “Woe”. The word is also found in several other places in the Bible where again the word is translated as “Woe”. (Is 10,5; 28, 1; Amos 5, 18 etc.)

There are other translations as well. In Jeremiah the same word, is translated as “Ha” or “Alas” (22, 18 and 34, 5). No one would regard “Alas” as a curse. The context here is the start of a lamentation, a lamentation poured out of a broken heart. This is not a curse but a cry of anguish about the impending disaster. Here is an example from Jeremiah: “So men shall burn spices for you and lament for you,

saying, 'Alas, lord!' For I have spoken the word, says the Lord"(Jer 34, 5). These words convey the kind of feeling one has when someone says, "How terrible!"

Amos also has used the word to convey the same feeling. "In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, 'Alas! alas!' They shall call the farmers to mourning, and to wailing those who are skilled in lamentation" (Am 5, 16). This was the cry that rose from the city that was totally ruined. None of these cries were curses or condemnations of any kind. They were merely lamentations over the disaster that befell them.

## Personal Experiences

The personal experiences of Isaiah and Jeremiah confirm this conclusion. Upon seeing God, Isaiah cried out with fear and trembling, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Is 6, 5). It was by no means a cry of fear of punishment but a cry of the deep awareness of his sinful state. When his prophecy resulted in continuous insult and persecution, Jeremiah also cried out and said, "Woe is me, my mother that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me" (Jer 15, 10).

From this brief analysis we can conclude that the translations such as "Woe" and "How terrible" do not denote a curse but a lamentation, a cry of anguish out of a broken heart. Whether the situation was a case of self-destruction, or the destruction of others, or of

the whole society, the response was the same: a cry of anguish coming out of a broken heart. There are many lamentations in the Old Testament and all of them reflect this cry of anguish that arose out of a deep sorrow.

## Disasters – Actual and Prophetic

The lamentations could be about a disaster that actually occurred. David lamented over Saul and Jonathan when they died on the mount Gilboa (2 Sam 1, 17-27). The lamentation could also be about a future disaster, a tragedy that “happened in the plan of God” though it had not yet actually taken place.

During the time of Jeroboam II (B.C. 783-743), there was great prosperity in Israel. But when in the midst of this prosperity ordinary people suffered utter misery. Amos lamented and said: “Hear this word which I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel: Fallen, no more to rise, is the virgin Israel; forsaken on her land, with none to raise her up” (Amos 5, 1-2).

In some cases, the disaster had not occurred in the eyes of the people, but had only happened in the prophetic eyes. On one such occasion Jeremiah lamented, “I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger” (Jer 4, 23-26).

When the prophets, enlightened by God, see the history through the eyes of God, the past and the future merge. The insights they have gained about eternity fill them with fear and sorrow. Then, they will not be pronouncing words of curse but lament over the disaster that has befallen the people, though it might not have happened in reality.

### **More a Warning**

The main aim of this lamentation is to warn the people and to urge them to repentance and conversion. The lamentation is a kind of forewarning of the disasters to come. But often the people fail to repent and to return to the Lord, and the end result is disaster. For example, because those in authority failed to listen to the prophets, in 721 B.C. Assyria destroyed Israel and in 587 B.C., Babylon destroyed Judah. Only after these events, did the people realize the meaning of the lamentations of the prophets.

Jesus had warned about the disasters to come on several occasions. In the middle of His public ministry He had lamented over the cities in which he had performed many miracles. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes....And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the Day of Judgment for the land of Sodom than for you” (Mt 11, 20-24). This was not a curse but a warning about the fate of the cities that do not repent. It is also a lamentation, which sees the future as present.

For all these reasons, it would be more appropriate to translate the word 'ouai' into "How terrible your situation is" or "alas" rather than with the phrase "Woe". This way we shall be capturing the true meaning, the deeper meaning intended by the sacred author. Such reasoning would automatically eliminate any kind of allusion to the notion of curse.

## Jerusalem

The Evangelists report that Jesus lamented not only about a few minor towns, but also about Jerusalem itself, the political and religious capital of Israel.

After concluding his ministry in Galilee, while he was on his way to Jerusalem, he lamented. "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 12, 34-35). This was neither a curse nor a pronouncement of punishment but just a lamentation, forewarning the misery of the city and of all those who dwell in it.

This lamentation became clearer and more painful when Jesus viewed Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, "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 weeps for His people

Jesus started his discourse to the Jewish Leaders, Pharisees and Sadducees, with the opening phrase “Woe to you”. This should neither be viewed as a curse or as a judgment over them but as a lamentation over the situation they had reached by their hypocrisy, pride and lack of faith.

Jesus was weeping, seeing their terrible situation. The leaders who worship God and teach others to do so had themselves distanced themselves from God. In fact, they had become the enemies of God. Their life of hypocrisy, glaring difference between what they said and what they did, had itself become a witness against them.

Jesus was behaving just the same way as the Prophets Amos, Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah when they had lamented seeing the total destruction of Jerusalem even when the country was at the peak of prosperity. His outbursts were not an expressions of hatred or anger towards the leaders but a cry of anguish about the misfortune that would befall them.

We find such songs of lamentation over the future destruction in the book of revelation also. ‘Alas! alas! thou great city, thou mighty city, Babylon! In one hour has thy judgment come’.... who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! In one hour, she has been



laid waste” (Rev 18, 10-19). This was the cry of the people who stood watching the city that had fallen prey to the consuming fire. The Book of Revelation depicts the fall of Rome as already happened, though the actual fall took place only after several centuries.

## Salvation is a Gratuitous Gift

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you”. The message is clear. What is required is not any amendment in the teaching but a proper understanding of the words of Jesus. Salvation, the Kingdom of God, is a gratuitous gift from God. Lack of faith, inappropriate lifestyle and unwillingness to change come in the way of our receiving this gift. Some people will not be able to enter the Kingdom of God, not because they are cursed but because they refused to accept the gratuitous gift from God.

Jesus has explained this truth through many of his parables. The story of the Foolish Virgins who did not take extra oil when they went out to receive the bridegroom (Mt 25,1-13), the story of the Unfaithful Servant who buried the Talent he received (Mt 25,14-30) and the story of the Man who entered the banquet hall without the required Wedding Dress (Mt 22, 1-14) are just few examples.

## Be Vigilant

The door to the banquet hall was wide open and the people had been given the invitation but yet there were many who chose not to come. Some arrived late, after the door was closed. They were denied entry not as a punishment but because they opted themselves

out by not responding to the invitation in time. What is the lesson we learn from this? We should not ignore or neglect the opportunities that come our way. We must make sure to arrive at the banquet hall on time when the door is open. "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6, 2).

Jesus did not hate even those who had regarded Him as their enemy, who had pursued him with dogged determination and had him crucified amidst unmatched cruelty. The prayer He uttered from the Cross is the ultimate proof of his spirit of forgiveness: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23, 34). He did not hate those who did him wrong. Rather He forgave them and loved them to the end.

## Hypocritical Attitude

To love someone does not amount to pretending as if the mistakes are not noticed or that the person is regarded as good. True sign of love is pointing out the mistakes and helping him to correct them. The lesson learnt from the prophets and from our own experience is that one who fails to correct the mistakes seen in others is a hypocrite. Eventually this sort of hypocritical attitude on our part harms the person instead of helping him/her to become better.

This is proved from a critic of Jeremiah: "From the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, every one deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jer 6, 13-14). The author of the book of laments asserts that the destruction of

Jerusalem was wrought by the hypocrisy of the false prophets and their failure to do their duty faithfully. "What can I say for you, to what compare you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What can I liken to you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion? For vast as the sea is your ruin; who can restore you? Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen for you oracles false and misleading"(Lam 2,13-14).

### To Sum Up

"Woe to you" was in most cases a cry of anguish, aimed at exposing the wrong-doings of the people and of their leaders. 'Woe to you' was a call for conversion. It forewarned the people of the disasters that would befall them if they failed to convert.

The lamentations and the cries of anguish are directed not only at the religious leaders of the time of Jesus but at all of us, at all places and at all times. For after all, few among us can claim immunity to the deadly disease of hypocrisy and other such follies that the Jewish leaders were guilty of. If one were to add one's own name to the phrase "Woe to you, hypocrite...." one could immediately recognize the meaning and the relevance of this message.

# 17

## HEAVEN, UP OR DOWN?

The poster of the cinema, “Paradise” carried this declaration: “The heaven is not up in the sky but it is our right, here on earth”. Is this a valid claim?

Many would have seen the advertisement of the film. There was a picture of a man dressed in white, wearing a rather wide red belt. The man appeared to be the hero of the film. The intention of the movie seems to be to challenge the teaching of the Catholic Church. Or was the aim something else? Whatever may the aim be, the name “Paradise” and the claim that Heaven is here on earth need to be analysed against the teachings of the Bible and of the Catholic Church.

There are three things that need to be discussed:

1. What is “Paradise”?
2. What is heaven? Is Paradise and heaven one and the same?
3. Where is the Heaven, where is the Paradise?

## Paradise

Paradise is regarded as the place of ultimate joy and happiness. If so, where is this 'place' of happiness? We know of several religions and philosophies which teach that "Paradise" is a place on earth. Some even lay claim to their ability to create a Paradise on earth.

Paradise, it is said, is a source of great joy. What is joy? The definition of joy might vary from person to person depending on his particular faith and his specific interests. There can be a disagreement about the concept of Paradise itself. However, the Bible has a definite view of Paradise.

## Biblical View of Paradise

The word "Paradise" comes from the Persian word "Pairidesa". In Greek it is termed as "Paradaisos". The Persians envisaged a garden, protected by compound walls. This is what is conveyed by the word "Pairidesa". The Paradise was generally the garden of the king. The king would go for a walk in the garden. He would invite his faithful servants and people he wishes to honour to walk with him. Thus, "Paradise" was considered to be a place where one shares close friendship with the king. It was from this concept that the Bible developed the idea of "Paradise".

The word "Paradise" is found in three places in the Hebrew Bible. It refers to the garden of the king in Ecclesiastes (2,5); and in the Song of Songs (4,13). In Nehemiah (2, 8).the word refers to the forest of the king. In all the three cases, the concept of Paradise had no religious connotation, and it was not

associated with any religious faith. Rather the word 'Paradise' had a purely secular content.

## **Paradise is a Garden**

In the Greek edition of the Bible the word Paradise is found more than forty times. Most of the time, it refers to some kind of a garden. In the book of Genesis (Chapters 2-3), the word, "Paradise" is seen 13 times. Here it is used with a religious connotation, in reference to man's relationship with God.

The Hebrew word "Ghan" which means garden was translated into Greek as "Paradeisos". This garden was of a special kind because it contained all that was enjoyable for the mind and all the five senses. Above all, God used to walk with man in this garden. This is how the word acquired the meaning we generally associate it with, a place where one dwells with God. In this garden, man lived in complete harmony with all: with one's own self, with the nature, with the others and ultimately with God Himself.

Man was deprived of all these blessings the moment he disobeyed God. He was made to become aware of his nudity and he felt ashamed. The man and the woman began to accuse each other. All of nature turned against him. He grew frightened and tried to run away from the presence of God. All these events tell us clearly the view of the Bible on the subject of "Paradise".

## **Paradise in the New Testament**

The word "Paradise" is found only three times in the New Testament. The first occurrence is when Jesus gave the promise to the criminal on the cross:

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23, 43). This implies that Paradise is a state or something that would come about after death. It essentially means being with God and with Jesus after death.

The second instance is in the second letter to the Corinthians where St. Paul explains an experience, “I know that this man was caught up into Paradise - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows” (2 Cor 12, 3). This is a description of the blessing the just ones would receive while being with God after their death.

The third occurrence is in the Book of Revelation. The Book presents a picture of the Tree of life which points to the eternal bliss one enjoys after death. “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (Rev 2, 7).

We can see the development of the concept of Paradise in the Jewish intertestamental literature, often qualified as Apocrypha. Paradise was also associated with life after death. Until the third century B.C. the prevailing thinking was that all the dead went into an eternal sleep. By the second century B.C. this view underwent a change. Two different levels were envisaged to exist in ‘sheol’, the resting place of the dead. The just enjoyed the blessings in the upper room while the unjust suffered punishment in the lower pit.

After a while, the concept underwent further change. The souls of the just would go up into the

“Lap of Abraham” and the souls of the unjust would go down to sheol. As the concept of resurrection developed, a conviction grew that the just would enjoy the presence of God in Paradise with body and soul and the sinners would go into hell, to eternal punishment. One thing is clear. In all these cases “Paradise” is seen as a state of joy one experiences with God after death. It was on this foundation that the concept of “Heaven” developed.

## Heaven

Bible uses the word Heaven to emphasize the presence of God. It is also used as a synonym for God. Being in Heaven means to be with God. What is referred to as the Kingdom of God by the other Gospels is defined as the Kingdom of Heaven by St. Mathew. Heaven is also depicted as the dwelling place of God. Because of the great reverence the Jews had for God, they substituted the word Heaven for God. Thus, Heaven and God were regarded as one and the same reality. “Going to heaven” signifies ‘going to God’.

The Bible cannot conceive of a Heaven without God. When the concept of “Paradise” gained more clarity, it became equated with Heaven. If “Paradise” means being with God, Heaven means God. Though the concepts “Paradise” and “Heaven” have had different emphasis, in the perspective of the New Testament, both of them fundamentally refer to the same reality- being with God for all eternity.

## Where is Heaven?

The advertisement claims that Heaven is not in the sky but on the earth and that we are all heirs



to it. To understand where Heaven is in the view of the Bible, we have to first understand the thinking that existed at that time about the structure of the universe. We should also know the various literary forms used in the Bible.

The belief at that time was that the earth was flat like a board. The sky remained over the earth like a bowl or an open umbrella placed upside down. There was water both below the earth and above the sky. The base of the earth was made firm with pillars in the water below. In the sky, there were sun, moon and the stars. The dwelling place of God, Heaven, was supposed to be above the water over the sky. This was the concept man had developed about the universe. According to this framework, God and Heaven are above in the sky. That is why when Prophet Elijah was taken up in the chariot of fire, Elisha stood there looking up. After Ascension, the Apostles also stood there looking into the sky.

As the science developed, it would seem a bit absurd to accept such a concept about the structure of the Universe. Earth is not a flat board but a globe that turns and moves around the sun. The universe consists of innumerable planets. In such a view of the Universe, it is impossible to figure out what is up and what is down. It is here that the literary form of the Bible becomes important.

To describe invisible reality, Bible uses visible images. Even people with high level of scientific knowledge speak of the sun rising in the East and setting in the West, though they know that the sun does not rise or set.

## Concept of Heaven

The same thing needs to be said about the concept of Heaven. Neither the Church nor the Bible teaches that Heaven is a globe or a planet in some corner above the sky. In one way it is correct to say that Heaven is not above in the sky. But the one should be aware of the fact that the word “above” is used not only to indicate a location but also to say that the reality is something “beyond or different, standing high etc.” It is in this sense that we need to understand when we say God and Heaven exist above. The belief that Heaven is above, or that God is “above” helps to explain that the invisible God who created this universe is different and is beyond the full comprehension of the human intellect.

It is a reality that God is everywhere. It is also true to say that God is on earth. Both the statements are complementary. “Heaven” does not refer to a place but to a state of being. If Heaven is the dwelling place of God, wherever there is God, that place is Heaven too. Just as God, is everywhere; Heaven is everywhere. Hence “Heaven” refers to a state of being.

If we regard “Heaven” as a state, we can see that the statement carried in the advertisement of the film makers can be only partially true. It is not a state of pleasure or some enjoyment but a state of being with God who is the source of all life and happiness. That is the teaching of the Bible and the doctrine of the Catholic Church.

This reality starts on earth. Jesus has said that the Kingdom of God is “in your midst” ( Lk 17,210.

The heavenly experience that starts on earth becomes a full reality only after death. Heaven would appear in all its splendour and power only at the end of the world. It is an eschatological truth, an eternal moment when the entire universe will be renewed and a New Heaven and a New Earth will be formed. Then, God will come down and reside with man and man would enjoy eternal life with God. As the book Revelation depicts so beautifully: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away"(Rev.21,1-4).

## Paradise on Earth

Once this happens, the plan of God with regard to the creation will be fulfilled. Then there will be no difference between 'up' and 'down'. God would dwell in all and all would dwell in God. The paradise lost by the sin of man will be re-established and the original unity will be restored. A foretaste of this Heaven is seen on earth, in the hearts of people who accept God as the Father and all others as brothers and sisters. Paradise and Heaven is one and the same thing. Paradise is on the earth and also in the sky. Heaven

is both up and down. They are not conflicting but complementary realities.

## **To Sum Up**

No one can build a “Paradise” or a “Heaven”, whether now or hereafter, on earth or up above, by rejecting God and one’s fellow human beings. Experience shows that what is created by keeping God out of the picture will not be a Heaven but a hell on earth.

## 18

# THE KINGDOM OF GOD: INSIDE YOU OR IN YOUR MIDST?

“Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Lk 17, 21). Some editions of the Bible say that the Kingdom of God is ‘within you’. Which of the two is the correct translation?

To say “in your midst” or “among you” is different from saying “inside you” or “within you”. The two expressions lay emphasis on two different things. Though this issue has been debated by scholars extensively over a period time, the controversy still persists and to is difficult to choose one over the other.

Translations in the various languages also carry these different versions. The Revised Standard Version (RSV), The New American Bible (NAB), The Jerusalem Bible (JB) and the New English Bible (NEB) editions have Kingdom of God is ‘in your midst’ or ‘among you’. But Good News Bible (GNB), Peoples

Study Bible (PSB), and New International Bible (NIB) editions state that the Kingdom of God is ‘within you’.

Italian, French and German (ecumenical translations) seem to say that the Kingdom of God is ‘among you’. The Latin translation Vulgata records it as “intra vos” and it could be read in either way. Since so much variation exists in all the different editions, it is necessary to study the original text, which is in Greek.

### ‘Entos’ = “Inside”

The original language of the New Testament is Greek. The word used here is “entos”. This word has been used only twice in the Gospels (Mathew 23, 26 and Luke 17, 21). As a matter of fact, this word appears as part of the scathing attack Jesus mounted against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean” (Mt 23, 25-26). Here the word “entos” is translated as ‘inside’. The only other instance of the word in the NT is the passage under consideration.

In the Greek Old Testament the word “entos” occurs seven times, and in all the cases the word is used to mean “inside” (e.g. Ps 38,3; 108; 22; Is 16,11; Micah 4, 48). In the classical Greek also, the word bears the meaning “inside”. Then why did many of the important versions translate the word as “among you”?

We cannot find an answer to this issue by analysing the word alone. Maybe a careful study of the

Gospel's passage may shed some light on the subject. We are referring to the theme "Kingdom of God".

## Kingdom of God

The Pharisees had asked Jesus as to when the Kingdom of God would come. It was while responding to this question, that Jesus had used the word 'entos'. The coming of the Kingdom of God will not be marked with extraordinary signs. "Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you (or within you)". Now the two prepositions emphasize two different dimensions of Kingdom of God, namely, personal and social.

### Personal Dimension

The Kingdom of God is certainly a matter of personal conversion. First of all, the heart has to be cleansed and prepared to accept the will of God. The rule of God should first be accepted in the heart. The Kingdom of God, rooted in the heart will grow, produce branches and spread throughout the society. From this perspective, it is right to say that the Kingdom of God is "inside or within you". This emphasizes the personal dimension.

### Social Dimension

The Kingdom of God is a Divine reality that would bring about radical changes in the society. It will be a reality in the society where people surrender themselves

to the will of God and conduct their lives according to God's plan. The will of God was fully realized in the person of Jesus Christ. With Jesus the Kingdom of God has entered the world. The Kingdom of God is truly "in your midst". This emphasizes the social dimension.

## Personal and Social Dimensions

Jesus went around inviting people to undergo conversion. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 4, 17; Mk 1, 15). Conversion has both personal and social dimensions. Change of heart would lead to change of behaviour which in turn would lead to social changes. The presence of the Kingdom of God would motivate people to change. Therefore, the Kingdom of God comprises of both the personal and the social dimensions.

## Both Dimensions are Required

For a lasting change internal conversion is essential. However, limiting the Kingdom of God only to personal change alone is not sufficient. Alongside with personal conversion there has to be a focus on bringing about social changes as well. Without societal changes, the Kingdom of God will be left without a firm foundation. Most of the parables of Jesus lay emphasis on the social dimension. So, the Kingdom of God has to be "inside" you, "within you". At the same time, the Kingdom of God has also to be "among you", "in your midst"

## St Paul on the Kingdom of God

St Paul's definition of the Kingdom of God also includes both these dimensions, social and personal. "The kingdom of God is not food and drink but



righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men" (Rom 14, 17-18).

"Righteousness" is a situation that exists when people live according to the Will of God manifested in the Commands. This implies a healthy relationship with God and with other people. A state of "righteousness" highlights the social dimension of the Kingdom of God. Likewise, "peace", or prevalence of "peace" is also an outcome of the good relationship a person has with himself, with others, with the universe and with God. The Kingdom of God is "in your midst", "among you".

However, 'the joy in the Holy Spirit' is something that pertains to the internal dimension. It is an indication of a person's intimate relationship with God. Joy is a sign of someone being at peace with God, savouring the divine bliss. The Kingdom of God is "within you", "Inside" you.

## To Sum Up

The Kingdom of God cannot be considered as a social entity which has no connection to an individual's personal life. Likewise, the Kingdom of God cannot be regarded purely as a personal matter either. The Kingdom of God is both an individual event and a collective occurrence. It is both personal and social. They both are inseparable. They are two sides of the same coin.

Therefore, the saying that the "Kingdom of God is in you" or "within you" as well as the saying that

the “Kingdom of God is among you” or “in your midst” are both equally valid. There is no conflict between the two narrations. “Inside” could refer not only to an individual person but also to the larger society. Likewise, “among you” could also mean the larger society and a particular person.

### An After thought

Why do such things happen? Different meanings? Different versions? Different translations?

The reason is intrinsic to the language itself. Certain words, particularly in ancient languages, mean a lot, convey a lot, all of which could not be translated by just one word. For example the Hebrew word *hezed* which is often translated as Love. But the original word means much more. It implies a love that has been guaranteed by a covenant, and so it is unbreakable, never ending, steadfast love. It can be sometimes translated as mercy, compassion. Hence the translator is forced to choose one of the words that he thinks suits best. Hence there is the need of going back to the original language, which may not be possible for every reader. In such situations, a good commentary would help.

# 19

## THE LAST JUDGMENT

At the moment of death, every person will appear before the throne of God to receive the personal judgment pronounced by God. The verdict will determine if the person goes to Heaven or to hell. If this is the teaching of the Catholic Church, what is the meaning of the Last Judgment?

The doctrine of the Catholic Church regarding the end of man is clearly articulated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC). This doctrine can be found as an explanation of the part of the Creed “I believe in the everlasting life” in CCC §1020-1060, of which §1021-1022 deal with the personal judgment and §1041 dwells on the Last or Universal judgment.

Judgment in the Bible refers mainly to the Last Judgment. However, there are passages that state that each and every person would appear before God at the moment of death and would receive the judgment based on his/her deeds. The following passages are examples: “The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich

man also died and was buried. and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom” (Luke 16, 22-23); “And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Lk 23,43); “I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better’ (Phil1, 23. The statement in the Letter to the Hebrew is quite clear about this: “It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb 9, 27). Here one could ask, What is then the relevance of the Last Judgment?

## Significance of the Last Judgement

At the moment of death, a person receives his/her judgment that will not be changed later. If so, what is the need for the Last Judgment?

The Last Judgment is, first of all, the final confirmation of God’s judgment on the individuals. Second, the Last Judgment spells the end of human history and the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God. That is why the event is always referred to as the Last Judgment. What is our notion of the Last Judgment? The Church teaches us five things about the Last Judgment, based on what is stated in the Bible:

1. The Resurrection of the body
2. Appearance of the Son of God in all His glory
3. The Judgment over all the dead
4. Separation between the saved and the condemned;
5. The Establishment of Heaven and Hell for all eternity.

## The Resurrection of the Body

With the Last Judgment, the history of humanity comes to an end. "For the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (Jn 5, 28-29).

St. Paul further clarified this teaching when he said: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so, we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thes 4, 16 - 17).

## Appearance of the Son of God

The Glorified Christ would come to Judge all who have been resurrected, "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations" (Mt 25,31-32).

The book of Revelation describes this gathering in a different way. "The dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead in it; Death and Hades gave up the dead in them" (Rev 20, 13).

## The Judgment over the Dead

The Son of Man who comes in glory would

pronounce the final judgment over the creation gathered in front of Him. “I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also, another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done” (Rev 20, 12-13).

St. Mathew describes this judgment in detail (Mt 25, 31-46). He says that not only the actions but even the hidden thoughts will be revealed during the Last Judgment. “For nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light” (Mt 10, 26-27).

## Separation of the Good and the wicked

As the judgment is pronounced, the just and the unjust will be separated. “Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left” (Mt 25, 32-33). It is a time when the good and the evil will be separated forever. Until then, “Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn” (Mt 13, 30). In other words, it would be like collecting the good fish in the dish and throwing the bad ones away (Mt 13, 47-50).

## Establishment of Heaven and Hell

There is no more history but only eternity. "They will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt 25, 46). Two states totally separated forever. The state that is cut off from God is hell. The state that allows the souls into the presence of God is Heaven. Thus, the Last Judgment is the moment when the history is complete and the Kingdom of God is fully manifested.

## Catholic Catechism on the Last Judgment

The significance of this event is explained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. "In the presence of Christ, who is Truth itself, the truth of each man's relationship with God will be laid bare. The Last Judgment will reveal even to its furthest consequences the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life: All that the wicked do is recorded, and they do not know. When "our God comes, He does not keep silence." . . . He will turn towards those at his left hand: . . . "I placed my poor little ones on earth for you. I as their head was seated in heaven at the right hand of my Father - but on earth my members were suffering, my members on earth were in need. If you gave anything to my members, what you gave would reach their Head. Would that you had known that my little ones were in need when I placed them on earth for you and appointed them your stewards to bring your good works into my treasury. But you have placed nothing in their hands; therefore, you have found nothing in my presence" (CCC §103- the document is quoting from St. Augustine).

Only God knows when it would happen. “The Last Judgment will come when Christ returns in glory. Only the Father knows the day and the hour; only he determines the moment of its coming. Then through his Son Jesus Christ, He will pronounce the final word on all history. We shall know the ultimate meaning of the whole work of creation and of the entire economy of salvation and understand the marvellous ways by which his Providence led everything towards its final end. the Last Judgment will reveal that God's justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by his creatures and that God's love is stronger than death” (CCC §1040).

The meaning of history, the significance of each event and how everything was part of the Divine plan will all be revealed through the Last Judgment. Therefore, the message of the Last Judgment invites all to conversion. “The message of the Last Judgment calls men to conversion while God is still giving them “the acceptable time ... the day of salvation.” It inspires a holy fear of God and commits them to the justice of the Kingdom of God. It proclaims the “blessed hope” of the Lord's return, when he will come “to be glorified in his saints and to be marvelled at in all who have believed” (CCC § 1041).

## To Sum Up

The Resurrection of the body, Appearance of the Son of God in all His glory, Judgment over all the dead. Separation between the saved and the condemned and Establishment of Heaven and Hell for all eternity are the events scheduled for the occasion of the Last



Judgment The Last Judgment is not a mere repetition of the personal judgment. The Last Judgment marks the fulfilment of creation and its public proclamation. We may call it the Eschatological Summit. All of creation is waiting for that Summit eagerly: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom 8, 19)

## 20

# HOW MANY DONKEYS?

All the four Gospels report that, towards the end of His public ministry and before the Passion, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. Is there any significance to this event? While three of the Gospels say that Jesus entered on a colt, Mathew alone says that Jesus entered Jerusalem mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass. Which narration is correct? How can a person ride on two animals at the same time?

There are mainly two issues here. a) What is the significance of Jesus' entering Jerusalem on a donkey? b) How many donkeys were there?

### Entering the City on a Donkey

Though donkey is regarded in our society as a foolish creature, the Bible gives it a special place. People used donkeys for travelling and for carrying goods. It was a very useful domestic animal.

What was the reason for Jesus deciding to enter Jerusalem on a donkey? Usually the pilgrims arrived

in Jerusalem on foot. While thousands were walking on foot, one person entering the city on a colt would attract attention. Was this perhaps the reason? Not at all! There was a very different purpose for Jesus' action.

The donkey was used not only to carry goods, but it was also used as a royal animal. King Solomon was made to ride on the mule of King David for his Coronation. "Solomon my son to ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon; and let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet there anoint him king over Israel; then blow the trumpet, and say, 'Long live King Solomon!'...caused Solomon to ride on King David's mule, and brought him to Gihon" (1 Kg 1, 33-38).

## Symbolism of Donkey

The fact that the newly anointed King rode on a donkey was a symbolic act. Jesus also might have used his entry to Jerusalem riding on a donkey as a symbolic gesture. What did it signify? The king who goes for war travels on a horse. When he returns after winning the war and re-establishing peace, he would travel on a donkey. There are two important lessons here: a) Donkey is a royal animal. b) Donkey signifies peace.

This symbolic message could not be missed. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey somewhat resembled a Royal Parade. The people acclaimed, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Lk 19, 38). All shouted aloud, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" (Jn 12,

13). Jesus arrived in the city as a King of Peace. He came not to lead a war but to establish peace.

This event also reminds us of a prophecy. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass” (Zech 9, 9).

The royal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem was the fulfilment of this prophecy. Realizing this, the people accompanied Him with shouts of joy and acknowledged Him as the King to come. Entering Jerusalem on a donkey signified the Kingship of Jesus and also the nature of His Kingdom.

### How many Donkeys?

How many donkeys were there during Jesus’ entry? Mark, Luke and John say that Jesus came “on a colt” whereas Mathew writes He rode “on an ass, and on a colt”. It is difficult to decide what really happened.

Almost everyone agrees that the Gospel of Mark was written first, whereas Mathew and Luke made use of the Gospel of Mark, for writing their Gospels. They also used other sources such as “a collection of sayings—Logien Quelle—or Q”. Certain sources which were available to Mathew were called SM – Special for Mathew and those available to Luke were called SL- Special for Luke.

If the Gospel of Mathew contained something that was not found in Mark, then it was regarded as material that was added to the original text. This is a widely

accepted theory in interpreting the Bible. Therefore, it is possible that Mathew altered the message “on a colt” into “on an ass and on a colt”. However, this comment gives rise to yet another question.

### Travel on two Donkeys?

How can a person travel on two donkeys at the same time? An approach usually adopted while interpreting the Bible may be mentioned here. In case of doubt about the original text when there is difference in manuscripts then the text that is difficult to understand would be regarded as the “original”. On the basis of this principle, the more complicated text of Mathew would have to be regarded as the original text, having greater historical validity. But again, the issue of how someone can travel on two different animals at the same time remains to be explained.

There is no doubt that Jesus travelled on a donkey to fulfil the prophecy of Zachariah. While the other Evangelists merely hint at this, Mathew clearly states it, quoting from Zechariah: “O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass” (Zech 9, 9). It is worth noting that Mathew insists that the prophecies were fulfilled to the letter in Jesus (Mt 1,23; 2, 5-6; 15, 17-23).

Knowing that it was necessary for the fulfilment of the prophecy, Mathew speaks of donkey, in fact of two donkeys. Many scholars tend to think that Mathew’s mention of two donkeys come out of a misunderstanding. It is very much a ‘Semitic’ practice

to repeat the same word , or use a similar word having the same meaning in order to emphasize a point. This is called “Synonymous Parallelism”. According to this theory, Mathew had failed to understand that Prophet Zachariah had used the phrase, “on an ass, on a colt” merely to emphasize the reality of the donkey. As a result, Mathew also used the same phrase while describing the Jerusalem entry.

### **Colt on which no one had sat on**

Is this a valid reasoning? Mathew was well aware of the peculiarities of the Semitic language. It is said that Mathew first wrote the Gospel in Aramaic and later he translated it into Greek and expanded it. Apparently, what we have today is the revised Greek version. Hence, there is little logic in saying that Mathew had misunderstood the text of Zachariah.

The book of Zachariah was first written in Hebrew and then it was translated into Greek. In both the versions, the same thing is written, “on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass”. Can it be argued that the second word was used as an elaboration of the first? It is also argued that a scribe who copied the text of Zechariah misunderstood a comma for the conjunction “and”, both which would look similar in Aramaic and hence the confusion. However, several scholars point to yet another possibility.

### **The Colt and the Ass**

Jesus travelled on a donkey on which no one had travelled before. Colt might not mean a very small animal but one that is big enough for people to ride

on but until then no one had travelled on it. Just like it is said elsewhere that Jesus was buried in a tomb in which no one else had been buried before. Here is an important consideration. When a colt is used for the first time, it might act up, and may not behave rightly. Therefore, the first use of the new colt is done in the presence of the mother donkey. For this reason, it is possible that the disciples brought the ass and the colt together for Jesus to travel. Though there were two donkeys, Jesus travelled only on the colt.

To avoid any confusion the other three Evangelists might have made mention of just the colt, but Mathew speaks of both the ass and the colt, to remain faithful to history and to the prophecy.

Before we can conclude this discussion, something more remains to be said, it is about tying and untying. "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me" (Mt 21, 2). This is the literal translation of the verse. Here only the mother, the ass, is tied and so only the ass needs to be untied. The colt stands near the ass which is tied. As a rule, the colt would just follow the ass, the mother. Though the disciples needed only the colt, but since it would not come alone, they had to take the ass as well. That is how they ended up bringing both the ass and the colt. However, Jesus travelled only on the colt on which no one had sat before.

## To Sum Up

Strange as it may sound, the much-underrated donkey was being used as a royal creature, in the

days of old, fit for a king to ride on to enter the capital city while he returns triumphantly, after defeating all the enemies. As a symbolic gesture, Jesus chose a donkey for his entry into Jerusalem, the only difference being His triumphs – crucifixion, death and Resurrection - were yet to take place. It was a victory march held in advance.

Was there one donkey or were there two? We may never know the correct answer. But in all likelihood, there was an ass and a colt, on which no one else had sat before and Jesus rode on it, with the mother ass accompanying it to ensure the colt behaved right through the long trip into Jerusalem. Was the mother ass aware that the ‘man’ who rode on her colt was no ordinary man?



## 21

# SON OF MAN AND VULTURES

“Where the body is, there the vultures will be gathered together” (Lk 17, 37). This verse is found towards the end of the discourse on the Coming of the Son of man. What is the body referred to here? What are the vultures? What represents the Son of man, the body or the vulture?

It is difficult to fathom the meaning of this teaching of the Master. No wonder it has led to many misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Therefore, a detailed study is attempted here.

First of all it has to be noted the Greek word *aetoi* can be translated either as eagle or as vulture. Some translate it as eagle, others as vulture. From a literal point of view both translations are correct, but in the present context the translation vulture is more apt because it is the vulture that search for dead bodies to devour. Hence here the translation vulture is take

## An Old Saying

Actually, this is a very old saying. To state a truth with force, the Bible often quotes a saying or a proverb that is popular in the place. Jesus has done it many times. The sayings quoted are not to be taken literally. So, it is immaterial what 'the body and the eagle' represent. What is important is to find out the message conveyed through this saying.

In trying to understand the meaning of the saying, we find that there are two aspects: place and time. If the vultures are seen circling in the sky around a spot, the conclusion would be that there is some dead body is close by. This then refers to the issue of the place.

The vultures appear when there is a dead body and this refers to the aspect of time. It is not necessary to choose one or the other, either place or time. They could be regarded as complimentary. To understand what Jesus is trying to teach us through this saying, let us examine what the circumstances were when the saying was quoted.

The saying is a sort of a concluding comment to the discussion about the Coming of the Kingdom of God and of the Son of man. The saying is presented as a reply to the question that Jesus was asked. "Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming?" (Lk 17, 20) At the end the disciples also asked him, "Where, Lord?" (Lk 17, 37). After giving a brief response to the Pharisees (Lk 17, 20-21), Jesus gave an elaborate answer to the disciples about the Coming of the Son of man (Lk 17, 22-35). The place and time were part of the discussion, part of the question and part of the response.

## Kingdom of God

The question as to when the Kingdom of God would come is an indication that such a belief existed among the Jews. They believed that the Kingdom of God would come with visible signs, similar to the signs that were seen during the Exodus event in Egypt, while crossing the Red Sea and during journey through the desert. That is why they asked Jesus to produce signs (Mt 12, 38; Jn 2, 18; 6, 30). The first response of Jesus was meant to correct this notion, as people would say, "Lo, here it is!" or "There!" for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Lk 17, 21).

The Kingdom of God is a state when the will of God will be fulfilled. All would live according to the plan of God. It will not be the re-establishment of the empire of David as the Jewish people had hoped and expected. The Kingdom of God is not a designated place, or a particular area or a specific geographical locality. It is a boundary-less state of people saved from sin by Christ Jesus through His life, death and resurrection. The establishment of the Kingdom of God had started with the coming of Jesus and His activities were the signs that the Kingdom of God has come (Lk 11, 20).

The discourse about the Kingdom of God is recorded after the narration about the healing received by the ten lepers and their behaviour on being healed (Lk 17, 11-19). The Samaritan who was healed by the word of Jesus realized this truth and he gave thanks to Jesus and offered his praises to God. But the other nine who were also healed did not realize this truth. They did not return to express their gratitude to Jesus. Like the nine lepers, the Pharisees also failed to understand the inner meaning of the activities of Jesus. The Kingdom of God was a call for an internal conversion, a life of faith and a life of repentance.

## The Eschatological Event

The Kingdom of God is manifested through the activities of Jesus. This was just the beginning. The second part of the discussion is about the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God. It was done in the form of a teaching to the disciples. The day of the Lord that the disciples long to see, refers to the eschatological event (Lk 17, 22).

The Second Coming of Jesus is elaborated in the following verses. “As the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. As it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man.... fire and sulphur rained from heaven and destroyed them all so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, let him who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away; and likewise let him who is in the field not turn back....” (Lk 17, 24-35). Through many examples Jesus exhorted His disciples to be vigilant at all times since no one knows the time when it would happen.

## The Need to be Vigilant

Jesus said that if two people were to be engaged in the same task, one will be taken away and the other will be left behind. Hearing this, the disciples asked Jesus as to where they will be taken. Here the subject of discussion was the Last Judgment which would happen at the end of time. Generally, people would conclude that one will be taken to Heaven and the other will be left to face the eternal punishment. Jesus did not provide a direct answer.

In fact, it was as a response to the question of the Pharisees and the disciples that Jesus had quoted the proverb. "Where there is a body, the vultures would rush to the spot". Jesus does not give any definite answer as to the time or place, but what he tells is that when it is time the Son of Man will come as surely as where there is a carcass vultures are bound to appear. This would happen at the time decided by God and all will see it. By the way, neither the body nor the eagle refers to the Son of Man. The comparison is neither with the carcass nor with the vulture, but with certainty of the event. There is no point in asking when that will be, because as Jesus said: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mk 13,32).

This is the oft-repeated teaching of Jesus through the parables and the proverbs: to be vigilant at all times. We do not know when the Last Judgment would take place. We must be prepared all the time like the five wise virgins. What is expected of the followers of Christ is not that they calculate and try to find the moment of the eschatological event (Acts 1, 7; Mt 24, 36) but that they live always according to the teachings of Jesus.

## To Sum Up

"When will Jesus come as the Son of Man to judge, and when will the end of the world be?" No one knows the time or the hour, except the Father in Heaven. We shall never know the hour in advance. But we shall all know it immediately as the event occurs. We can never know the hour of Christ's coming in advance. Therefore, we need to be ever vigilant, ever ready to receive Jesus when He arrives and to be able to present a positive report of our lives.

## 22

# STANDING OR SITTING

In the Acts of the Apostles it is reported that while Stephen was being tried before the Sanhedrin, he saw “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7, 56). But the Gospel of Mark says that Jesus “sat down at the right hand of God” (Mk 16, 19). These are two differing accounts. How do we reconcile them? Which of the two versions is correct? Is Jesus standing or sitting near the throne of God?

One may argue that the Son of Man has to be either standing or sitting. He cannot be sitting and standing at the same time. This is no big mystery. There can be a simple response. Anyone who is engaged in a discussion with someone or some persons in some place is likely to be sitting at times and standing at other times. This is no big deal. It is only natural that you sit sometime and you stand sometime while you are with someone. Why make an issue out of it?

However, in the Bible, standing and sitting have a special significance, they carry a special meaning.

Though our discussion is merely whether Christ is sitting on or standing at the throne of God, a more important issue is involved. Irrespective of the fact whether He is sitting or standing, what is of relevance is where He is. In both the accounts, in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Gospel of Mark, it is said that Christ is on the right-hand side of the Father. There is no dispute about it. The matter under contention is whether Christ is sitting or standing on the right-hand side of God.

St. Mark has said that Jesus sat at the right-hand side of God. This was part of the narration related to the Ascension. "Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God" (Mk 16, 19). Here is an important point. Is there any right side or the left side at all for God who is Spirit? This sort of speaking was merely a usage to describe a situation, or express a truth. God is not seated at some particular place. Therefore, we have to ask what is meant by the Biblical writers when they speak of Christ sitting or standing at the right-hand side of God.

Only Mark and Luke have recorded the Ascension of Jesus. Luke writes, "While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven" (Mk 24, 51). The same event is described in the Acts of the Apostles, "When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1, 9). St Peter, during his first speech had said, "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God" (Acts 2, 33). This was supported by the Psalm, "Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool" (Ps 110, 1).

“Being lifted up to heaven” and “being seated at the right hand of God” are meant to convey the same thing. St. Mathew, who incidentally had not recorded the Ascension event, provides the clarification about what was intended to be conveyed: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28, 18). Jesus who completed the task of redemption has been given all the authority by the Father. This is the underlying meaning of “being at the right-hand side of the Father”.

St. John did not record the Ascension event but he presents the meaning in a different way, Jesus who came from the Father returned to the Father. “Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father” (Jn 13, 1). Through this return, He reconciled humanity to the Father and humanity is saved. The door of the Paradise that was closed by the sin of Adam is reopened. The way is prepared for humanity to come God: (Jn 14, 1-3). This happened through the death of Jesus on the Cross. St. John presents the Crucifixion of Jesus as his glorification (Jn 3, 15; 12, 32).

The same message was delivered by St. Paul. Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2, 7-11).



The one who sits on the right-hand side has all the power of God. To drive home this message the early Church made use of Psalm 110 that deals with the enthronement of kings. The one who is anointed as king operates as the representative of God on earth. "Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool" (Ps 110, 1). Though this was said about the enthronement of an earthly king, it was actually a prophecy regarding the Messiah who was to come.

It was to assert this message that Jesus quoted this Psalm and silenced the Lawyers of Israel (Mk 12, 35-37). The prophecy spoke of the Incarnation and the glorification of the Son of Man. Jesus claimed that He is the fulfilment of that prophecy. But the Pharisees were not willing to accept it.

In short, "being on the right-hand side of God" means possessing the authority of God. Right-hand side does not refer to any physical posture. Sitting does not mean that Jesus is not present elsewhere. St. Mark asserted that Jesus was with them, meaning His disciples. Mark writes: "They went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it" (Mk 16, 20). Mathew actually echoes the sentiments of Jesus when he writes, "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28, 20).

Jesus, the Almighty God, is present with us at all times and in all places. He is the Lord of the universe and possesses all the powers. We should feel blessed to be under His protection. We shall give witness to His love and mercy, His power and glory, forever and ever.

## Standing on the Right-hand Side

Now, let us discuss the next part of the question. What does it mean to stand at the right-hand side of God? In order to understand this one has to see the context in which this was said, that Jesus is standing at the right-hand side of God. The Sanhedrin, the supreme authority of Israel, had accused Stephen of blasphemy, a crime deserving of death sentence under the Jewish Law. Stephen was aware that the highest power of the Jewish religion had found him guilty and they were about to sentence him to death.

At this moment, when Stephen looked up, as a sign or seeking god's help, he saw that the heavens had opened and Jesus was standing at the right-hand side of God. It was as though the heavenly court intervened in time and revised the verdict passed by the human court, here below. All this happened because of the intervention of Jesus. Jesus, positioned at the right hand-side of God the Supreme Judge of the Universe, acknowledges Stephen as his disciple and pleads for him. The one who stands on the right-hand side of the judge is the advocate who speaks in favour of the accused. Jesus was fulfilling His promise, "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 10, 32). Therefore, Stephen had no fear.

The one who stands on the right-hand side does so to help. This has been reiterated many times in the Bible. "I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved" (Ps 16, 8). "For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save him from those who condemn him to death" (Ps 109, 31).

We can appreciate the sentiments voiced by Stephen. "The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand" (Ps 121, 5). Shade always stands for protection. A similar sentiment, expressed in a negative way, is found in the lamentation of the Psalmist, "I look to the right and watch, but there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me, no man cares for me" (Ps 142, 4).

Maybe, because the right hand possesses more power and skill, the usage of right hand for different purposes has become very common. Several passages in the Bible remind us of the significance of the right hand. "Thou hast given me the shield of thy salvation, and thy right hand supported me, and thy help made me great" (Ps 18, 35). "I know that the Lord will help his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with mighty victories by his right hand" (Ps 20, 6). We see the same idea in the description of the Last Judgment, "He will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left" (Mt 25, 33).

## To Sum Up

Jesus, who sits at the right of God, is the one who has been glorified and received all the power from the Father, whereas standing at the right hand side points to his acknowledging the disciples and pleading for them. However, these postures are to be understood as metaphors, not literally. Jesus is there for us, at the right-hand side of God, always pleading for us all with His Father.

How much blessed are we all to have a permanent and a powerful advocate at the Court of God! We are guaranteed to obtain all the verdicts in our favour provided we are truthful, loyal and committed to our advocate Jesus.

## 23

# HALLELUIAH – HOSANNA

During the liturgical services in the church and during other prayer meetings, we constantly hear the acclamation “Halleluiah, Hosanna”. At times we only hear a one-word acclamation “Hosanna”.

Halleluiah! Hosanna! What do they mean? Where did these words originate from? Since mostly both the words are used together, do they mean the same thing? These are questions requiring answers.

We are aware that these two words – Halleluiah and Hosanna – carry a lot of importance in the prayer life of the Christians. They have much sentimental value as well. What may be of interest to know is that the words were not created or initiated by the Christians. The words have their origins in the Hebrew language and they were part of the prayers of the Jews. These words appear frequently in the Bible, especially in the Psalms. Occasionally they are found in the New Testament also. However, Halleluiah and Hosanna have very different meanings.

## Halleluiah

This word originated from the Hebrew word, “Hallel” which means “Praise”. The imperative the plural form of the word is “Hallelu”. By adding the shortened form of the name Yahweh, “Yah” to this word, the term “Halleluiah” was formed. The origin of the word occurred in this way: Hallel or Hallelu + Yahweh = Halleluiah. It means an invitation: “You Praise the Lord”.

In the common parlance, it would mean “Lord, we praise you” or “Praise to God”. This is the meaning the word carries when used in the personal prayer. In the public worship ‘Halleluiah’ was used as a joyful cry of acclamation. This is true even today. Even so, let us study the words “Hallel” and “Halleluiah” separately.

### Hallel:

God’s intention in freeing the Israelites from slavery and then in accepting them as His own people was that they would give Him praise. “Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me’; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son” (Ex 4, 22-23). The people as a community should praise God, and the tribe of Levites was particularly chosen to offer praise to God (2 Chr 7, 6). For this, Ezra used the word “Hallel”. Besides praise, “Hallel” is used also as a titular term.

Some Psalms are known as “Hallel” or “Hallel Psalms”. Psalms 113 to 118 are known as “little Hallel” or “Egyptian Hallel” because there is a belief that these Psalms were composed by Moses as the Israelites were leaving from Egypt. The title

was derived from this Psalm: “When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became his sanctuary, Israel his dominion” (Ps 114, 1-2).

This Psalm was recited during the main feasts in the Jerusalem Temple and the Passover meal at home. Mathew, writes about these Psalms: “When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Mt 26, 30). God is praised recalling to mind the great things He did, especially their liberation from slavery in Egypt.

Psalms 120 to 136 are known as “Great Hallel” because they are Psalms of praise to God, for all the blessings He bestowed upon the people, such as creation, protection, liberation, and for the victory over their enemies. This theme is most evident and spelt out clearly in Psalms 135 and 136.

Psalms 146 to 150 are known as Halleluiah Psalms because these five Psalms begin and end with Halleluiah. Thus, the entire book of Psalms that has 150 chapters is nothing but an invitation to praise God and to express gratitude to Him.

## Halleluiah

Many of the Psalms begin (Ps 106, 1; 111, 1; 120, 1) and end (104, 35; 105, 145; 115, 117) with the acclamation ‘Halleluiah’. It is an ancient shout of acclamation used in worship. Psalms 146-150 also begin and end with this acclamation. People express gratitude and praise to God for the protection, mercy and constant care of God which are evident not only in the lives of the people but also in the creation itself.

While Psalm 104 praises God for the creation and the protection, Psalm 105 and 106 recount the great things God did during the exodus event. When the Halleluiah Psalms were recited during worship, people used to repeat the word “Halleluiah” at the end of each stanza.

‘Halleluiah’ has an important place in the liturgical services of the Christian worship. On the request of Jerome (AD 345-419) who translated the Bible from Hebrew to Latin, Pope Damasus, gave directives to sing Halleluiah; after the first reading in the Latin Liturgy. Eventually the practice of reading certain Psalms and repeating “Halleluiah” after each stanza became common.

## Reasons for Praising God

Though ‘Halleluiah’ is an expression of praise to God, it is also essential to profess the reason for praising God. If not, the recitation might become a meaningless ritual and end up as a mere lip service. Acknowledging the great things God has done in our lives, and praising God for His love and care would help others to come to know God. They too would pray to Him and develop trust in His providence. Through them God will be glorified.

It is not enough that we glorify God but we also need to acknowledge the blessings received and express our love for God. St John has spoken of God’s great love for us in an emphatic way. “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),

God expresses Himself through his actions. We recognize Him in His creation, His protection and His love. When we praise God recounting all the blessings, we glorify Him. When we proclaim “Halleluiah” as a sequel to this acknowledgment, we make known the reasons for the praise.

Examples of such praises are seen in the book of Revelation. “After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, “Hallelujah!”. Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants”. Once more they cried, “Hallelujah!” The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.” And the 24 elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah!” (Rev 19, 1-4).

## **Praise- Glorify**

We use the words praise and glorify God, but does that mean, and why do we do that? It is also said that God created the human beings that they might praise Him- but why? Is God so interested in listening to His praises sung aloud, as a selfish tyrant? Well, we have to understand what exactly bible means by praising and glorifying and the purpose of the act. To praise someone means, to recount the good qualities of that person manifested through various ways, life, actions and words. By doing this other people will come to know the person, appreciate his good qualities and also be motivated to imitate him. This is part of the purpose of praising.



But when it comes to praising God it means much more. By praising God, first of all we remind ourselves that all that we are and all that have is a gift of God, a totally gratuitous gift. This awareness will make us thankful to God for this great gift. If we are a gift of God, then we should become aware that we are to live according to His will, expressed through the commandments and the right conscience in which His voice resounds. Thus by praising God we become thankful and responsible. That is the first effect of praising God. But that is not all.

Praising God means to recount what we have experienced, how good, compassionate, loving and forgiving God is. All these have been experienced not only on a personal level, but also as a community, as a people, as humanity. This will attract other people to God and thus God and His nature will be known to all. This knowledge will bring peace, joy and at the same time responsibility to all. Hence praising God is not for God's sake, but for our own sake. God is not a tyrant who is happy hearing all the beautiful words spoken about him by people, who are forced or compelled to do so, similar to some political propaganda, but a Father who feels happy when His children are happy and behave themselves. This is the main and real reason for praising God.

Glorifying God also has to be seen from this perspective. Very often the word glorify is taken as telling great things about a person. In fact the Oxford English Dictionary defines glorify as "to make something seen better or more important than it really is. One of the most well-known hymns

in the NT, is called the Magnificat, the hymn of the Bl. Mother. In fact it starts: "My soul magnifies the Lord" (Lk 1,46). The word Magnify, in the common usage means to make appear bigger or greater than what it actually is, as with a magnifying glass. Can anyone make God greater? Absolutely impossible, we all know. Then what does it mean?

Glorify and magnify have the same meaning in the bible. It is not making greater, but describing how great a person is, not telling lies, but trying to describe the indescribable. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps 19,1). This is an example of glorifying. Telling how one has experienced the power, care and love of God, that is glorifying God. Thus praising and glorifying God, in fact, come to the same thing. It is not for God that we do these, it is for ourselves.

God does not need anything, but wants to share His great, overflowing love with people who can understand be happy. That is why He created humans in His own image and likeness, as capable of understanding and enjoying. The measure of glory is love and the measure of love is self-giving: "Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends". Creation of man and woman in His own image and likeness was presented, in the account of creation, as the climax of God's great love, but the greatest manifestation of the glory of God is on the cross: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn3,16). Thus when we are asked and when we, glorify God, we not adding

anything to God's greatness, but only acknowledging his great, selfless love that has been showered upon us.

## Hoanna

'During the Holy Mass, Hosanna' is recited in the song of praise that the faithful sing right before the words of Consecration. 'Hosanna' originated from two Hebrew words "Hosheya na" which is a cry to "save", meaning Lord save us! "Na" is a form of request. Adopting the same pronunciation, we say it as "Hosanna" in English.

## Meaning of Hosanna

The meaning of 'Hosanna' is clarified and the circumstances behind its origin are explained in the Psalm 118, 25. This Psalm describes the situation of a person, probably the king, who was rejected, defeated and insulted by others, but he attained victory through the special protection and help of God. He then came to the Temple to express his gratitude to God.

Drowning in deep sorrow he cried to the Lord with these words, "Save us, we beseech thee, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech thee, give us success! Blessed be he who enters in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord" (Ps 118, 25-26). This is not only the prayer of an individual but also the prayer of an entire people. It means, 'Lord, we pray, save us and give us victory'.

This Psalm was portrayed as an acknowledgment of the victory of the people and of the king in particular, of victory achieved in the midst of a severe national crisis. This Psalm was recited during the Feast of the Tabernacle and during some other feasts as well.

The victory given to the king was seen as the victory the people received through the king. “Save us” was the prayer that resounded everywhere; “Send the Messiah to save us”. Eventually the request to send the Messiah turned into a song of welcome to the Messiah and a shout of joy and cheer, all of which resulted in a grand reception to Jesus in Jerusalem.

## Entry into Jerusalem

The psalmist’s acclamation, “Blessed be he who enters in the name of the Lord!” eventually turned into a part of the joyful welcome given to a king who returns after attaining victory. People received Jesus with these words of acclamation, when He entered Jerusalem on a donkey.

The shouting of the people who accompanied Jesus reminds us of what was written in the Psalm, “The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar!” (Ps 118, 27). St. Mathew writes: “Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road” (Mt 21, 8).

## The Coming of the Messiah

This prayer for the coming of the Messiah was recited during the annual Feast of the Tabernacles The Jews celebrated this feast during the 7th month (Tishri-September-October) 15 to 22, after the harvest of fruits, staying in the Tents for eight days (Lv 23, 33-44). The feast began on a Sabbath and ended on a Sabbath.

During the first seven days, the priest wearing the holy vestments would bring water to the Temple from the pool of Shiloh, in a silver jar. People would accompany the priest with carrying bunches made of branches of palm trees and olive trees tied together called "Lulab", in their hands. The priest would go around the altar once with the water jar on his head and then the people would raise their "Lulab" and shout "Hosanna".

After the procession the priest would take two pots, one filled with water and the other with wine, and would climb the steps of the altar and pour the water and wine together on the altar. This was meant to be a prayer for rain. On the eighth day the High priest would perform these functions. He would bring water in a golden jar from the pool of Shiloh. Then he would go around the altar seven times while the people shouted "Hosanna" raising the Lulab. During the seventh round the people would beat the ground with the Lulab.

Here then resounded the prayer of a people who awaited the Messiah. All these functions of the Feast of the Tabernacles were commemorated through the activities of the people who accompanied Jesus. "They took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" (Jn 12, 13). "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, 9).

## Jesus the Messiah

The people acknowledged Jesus as the Son of David and the Messiah that Israel had awaited and so

they accompanied Him with shouts of joy and praise. Though they misunderstood Him for an earthly king, the reception they gave Him was worthy of the King who was sent by God.

It is with this meaning in mind that people sing Hosanna during the Mass. Those who recognize the real presence of Jesus, acknowledge His presence by singing Hosanna. At the same time, they profess the divinity of Jesus by repeating "Holy" three times. This is the song of Isaiah, "One called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is 6, 3).

People acclaim Jesus as the King and God. In order to make this proclamation meaningful we must accept Jesus as our king and prove this acceptance by practicing the values of the Kingdom of God in our lives, love, justice and universal brotherhood.

## To Sum Up

Halleluiah and Hosanna are words of acclamation. Through these words we praise God and express our gratitude to Him. Halleluiah and Hosanna are also words of joy and jubilation, for the redemption we have earned through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. By our shouts of Halleluiah and Hosanna we also express our solidarity and togetherness as the People of God, feeling as though we have already arrived at the doors of Heaven, Halleluiah! At the same time these acclamations remind of our duty to remain faithful to the Lord and His commandments.

## 24

# WIDOW'S MITE AND THOSE WHO DEVOUR WIDOWS' HOUSES

Jesus “sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living” (Mk 12, 41-44).

### The Widow

What does all this mean? Is Jesus teaching us that we should contribute all that we have to the Church treasury? If we do that, how would we live? Where does the deposited amount go? What for is this offering? What is the relevance of this teaching in today's world?

Widow's mite is a very popular example used by most of the preachers. Copper coin is the coin of the smallest value; it was offered by a widow who was poor and ignored by the society. Jesus gives his reason for praising her. She gave away all that she had while others donated out of their abundance. She offered all that she possessed and thus she became a model of total commitment, an example worthy of emulation.

After giving away all that one has, how would the person live? This is a reasonable concern. Again, one might ask from where did she obtain those coins, which are barely adequate for a meal? How would she live after spending away the money for buying food?

By her action, she showed her faith in God that God who took care of her until now would continue to do so. Here we can appreciate the significance of the teaching of Jesus. "Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day" (Mt 6, 34).

Going one step further, "Do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind. For all the nations of the world seek these things; and your Father knows that you need them... Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys" (Lk 12, 29-33).

The woman had practiced all this in her life. Thus, she became a model of deep faith, boundless hope and complete surrender. It is for this reason that she is held up as a great example. But there are other reasons as well.



## The Offerings

Though the woman did not worry how the money would be used, Jesus and the Evangelist seemed concerned about it. This is evident from the circumstances under which the subject is presented. In the Jerusalem Temple there were 13 boxes for the faithful to deposit their offerings. All of them were kept in the court of the women. The bottom of the boxes was large while the top was very small. Because of their shape, they were called “trumpets”. People used to convert their offering into cash and deposit them in those collection boxes.

The money deposited was used for the management of the Temple, for the care of the priests and others who served in the Temple. The authorities were also expected to donate part of the offerings to the welfare of the poor, widows, orphans and all those in need. The money deposited in the Temple treasury is an offering made to God, though all knew that God has no need of money, but it was to be used for the services in the Temple. One of the main services, rendered indirectly to God, was giving food to the hungry, cloth to the naked etc. One of the main rules of Israel was that the money collected should be used for the poor. But that was not happening during the time of Jesus.

## Misuse of the Offerings

Temple authorities who had turned the House of God – Jesus referred to God as “My Father” - into a den of robbers, misused not only the money gained from selling the animals and money exchange but also the money deposited in the collection boxes. Jesus said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long

robes, and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretence make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation" (Mk 12, 38-40).

## Importance of the Context

While interpreting the Bible, it is important that we consider the text in its context. Gospels are not a collection of isolated verses but books that present the teachings and deeds of Jesus in a particular order. Therefore, the context in which the teachings or activities are presented has great significance.

An example is the incidence of rejection Jesus experienced in his home town. Mathew (13, 53-58) and Mark (6, 1-6) have recorded this event half way through the activities of Jesus in Galilee. But Luke has narrated it in the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus (Lk 4,16-30). He projects the event as a model and summary of the activities of Jesus. What is emphasized is that the words and deeds of Jesus in the Bible should be interpreted keeping in mind their specific context.

Coming back to the incident of the offering of the widow and the appreciation Jesus expressed for her action, let us consider the context. This is reported soon after Jesus spoke about the Scribes and Pharisees who devour the houses of the widows while pretending to offer long prayers. There is therefore a close relationship between both the incidents. They are also narrated together in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 20, 45; 21, 4). Thus, the offering of the widow is in utter contrast to the devouring of the widows' houses

by the Pharisees even as they pretend to be engrossed in long prayers.

## The Key Lessons

This story has several lessons. Even as it contains appreciation for the widow who offered all that she had, there is also a criticism of the teaching of the Pharisees and Lawyers which influenced her to make such an offer.

Who told her to give her last penny to the temple and convinced her that if she gives all that she has, God will be pleased with her? Could it be those who pretend to be engaging in long prayers? Hence the allusion "who devour the widows' houses" should be taken seriously. Everything stands challenged here: the matter of long prayers, the amount being charged for religious services, the attitude that encourages such an action and the suggestions to make such offerings.

The offering made in the Temple is not the subject of discussion. What is being criticized is the attitude of the Temple authority that encouraged the offering and supported it with their teachings. What they do with the money deposited in the bowls is an important issue. Jesus regarded it as a manipulation of the poor, which is a crime equivalent to robbing the poor. The Temple Authority could not ignore the criticism of Jesus; rather they perceived Him as a threat and plotted to get rid of Him. The misuse of the temple treasure also might have been intended when Jesus accused the leaders of turning the house of God into a den of robbers.

## Wise use of the Offerings

The issue is very relevant even today. How is the money collected in churches, temples and other places of worship being used? The faithful donate as much as they can, but often the religious authorities behave the way the Pharisees did which Jesus vehemently criticized. Though it may not be everyone, but some of those in authorities seem to handle the money received as if their own, without realizing the motivation of the donors and the sacrifices people had to make to save up the money donated.

Some preachers with their eloquence in narrating and praising the act of the widow are able to persuade the people to donate very generously, at times even more than they should, or they could afford. However, once the impact of the emotional appeal wears off, some of the people begin to worry whether they got carried away and donated more than they should have. All this happens because while being eloquent about the offering of the widow, the preachers fail to speak also about the failings of those “who were devouring the houses of the widows”. They do not sufficiently emphasize the obligation of the religious authorities to use the money wisely and responsibly.

## Money Matters

Not much seems to have changed with regard to money matters in the Church. Jesus died on the Cross to bring about the redemption of mankind and man’s reconciliation with the Father. Holy Mass is a commemoration, re-enactment and celebration of this Sacrifice. Mass is the gratuitous gift to all the faithful. But, if different rates are levied for different types of Mass, won’t it invite the kind of criticism

Jesus levelled against the Pharisees? Longer the prayer, greater was the donation expected by the Temple Authorities. Similar practices are being continued even today in our churches.

Those who benefit from the services of the priests and other such persons, have a responsibility towards them, to provide for their living. But, is it necessary to fix rates for various religious services? Are there no other ways of raising funds for the living expenses of the priests, like making a regular collection from the people? Out of this collection, a fixed allowance may be given to the priests and other service providers in the church. Periodically it could be revised to meet the increased cost of living. If such a practice is instituted, collecting fees for prayer could be avoided altogether. Pope Francis himself has suggested that we do away with the practice of collecting or accepting money as charges for the prayers offered.

### **Ostentatious Celebrations**

Another deplorable practice is the practice of raising money for various festival celebrations. Here too, are we using the money in the offering box in the right way? Many of the famous pilgrim centres do not hesitate to use the money collected for celebrating the festivals in a lavish manner. Large amount of money is spent on decoration and fireworks as though all this would please God. These are certainly not the right ways of spending the precious donations of the people. There are yet many things requiring improvement in our churches. What is given as offering is money given to God. That money belongs to the poor, especially to those who are in dire need

of the basic necessities of life. Even if the church has abundant funds, God is not going to be pleased if the poor are neglected and the money is wasted on needless expenditures.

## To Sum Up

In reality, what would be pleasing to God is the help and the care we extend to the poor. We have to stop using the widow's mite in any wasteful ways. The example of political parties who indulge in wasteful activities for ostentatious purposes is not to be followed in religious life. One should not lose sight of the warning Jesus gave about those "who devour the houses of the widows". We pray that they might not receive, "the greater condemnation" (Mk 12, 40). May we all be inspired to build houses for the poor instead of getting counted as one of those who "devoured the houses of the widows" because of our imprudent and wasteful expenditures.