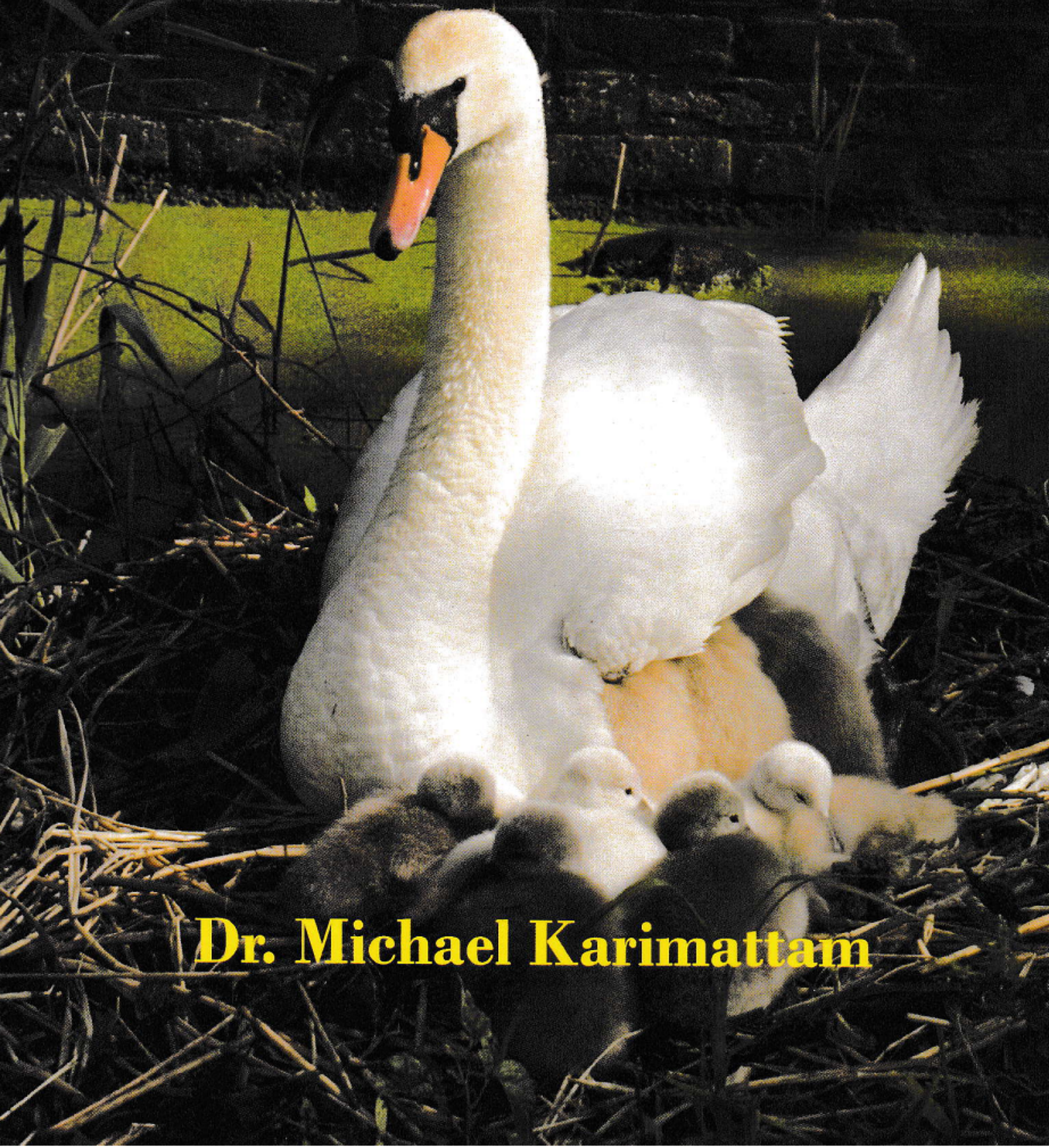


Under Thy Wings



Dr. Michael Karimattam

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Here in this book we are presenting fifty verses chosen from the Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament, to illustrate God's protection. Each chapter is self contained and so can be used for meditation or reflection. There are passages suitable for every occasion in our lives. These reflections could help even when one is not experiencing any crisis in life. All of us need God's protection, that saving presence at all times. The best picture that manifests God's protection is the symbol of a mother bird protecting the young ones under her wings, Hence this book is given the title: *"Under Thy Wings"*.



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INTRODUCTION

Human life is fragile from the beginning to the end and so needs protection more than any other creature in the world. We need help in infancy, childhood, old age and sickness. May be that is why God, the Creator, said that it is not good for man to be alone. Hence, God the Father, created human beings as male and female who would help each other, support each other and bring up children under their protection to be part of the society. This is the greatest privilege and responsibility God has entrusted to the humans. However, the number of people who do not receive this protection is increasing day by day.

Loneliness is one of the greatest pains and curses of the contemporary society. The feeling of being alone in the midst of the crowd is a painful phenomenon. In spite of all the modern conveniences, communication facilities, entertainment possibilities and medical assistance people are unhappy, lonely and scared. Children as well as adults experience lack of love and security. When everything falls apart, dreams are shattered, health fails and the very life is threatened, where can one seek and find security?

When unexpected disaster befalls upon us, when we are at the end of our rope and seem to fall into the bottomless pit of despair, we should listen to the soft, gentle voice that murmurs

deep in our hearts: “I am with you. You are not alone”. Bible depicts the picture of God as the one who dwells in our midst, who walks with us, who protects, who cares enough to listen, even to our deep sighs and frustrations.

Here in this book we are presenting fifty verses chosen from the Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament, to illustrate God’s protection. Each chapter is self contained and so can be used for meditation or reflection. There are passages suitable for every occasion in our lives. These reflections could help even when one is not experiencing any crisis in life. All of us need God’s protection, that saving presence at all times. The best picture that manifests God’s protection is the symbol of a mother bird protecting the young ones under her wings. Hence this book is given the title: “*Under Thy Wings*”.

At all times and especially when one experiences difficulties, anxieties, fears and despair, one should raise his/her eyes to the protective wings of God. When we know that the Almighty is protecting us, when we abandon ourselves into His hands and hide under His wings, we would feel safe and secure. What we need is the conviction that He is present with us, in us and He would never abandon us. May these reflections serve as inspiration to take refuge under the protective wings of our loving Father and Mother, God.

01. PROTECTING WINGS

Psalm 91, 1-4

“You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust. For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge” (Ps. 91, 1-4).

In the country side, though rarely, we can still see the hen and her brood. The chicks whose feet are too tender and the beak too weak to dig for food follow their mother bird. She would line up the food for them. In case of a threat from the enemy, like an eagle or falcon coming to snatch a chick, she would sound the siren and the chicks would rush to their mother and she would hide them under her wings. Once the babies are under the wings, no one can touch them without first killing the mother bird. She would fight the enemy beak and claw, to protect her young ones. So, the refuge of the chicks is under the wings of their mother.

Only through symbols and parables can one speak about the invisible and transcendent God. The bible uses numerous similes and symbols to speak about God, and the protection He provides. The mother bird protecting her brood under its wings is one of the most beautiful and attractive images.

At the hint of danger, the chicks run to their mother for protection and she would hide them under her wings. This beautiful image appears many times in the Bible, drawing a picture of God protecting His people, like a mother bird. Psalm 91 that proclaims the providence and protection of God depicts this picture beautifully. As the chicks run to their mother bird and hide themselves under her wings, so must we seek refuge in God always, especially when we are threatened by various forces. The chick that ignores the danger and stays outside the protective wings would be snatched away by the enemy. Here we have a lesson: only those who seek God's protection will be saved from all dangers.

The first thing one has to do to take refuge in God is 'believe'. Believe that I am not alone and He would spread His wings over me and protect me from all kinds of dangers. Secondly, rather than going after one's own whims and fancies, likes and dislikes one has to surrender oneself to God's plan. To do so, one has to listen to His voice, remain close to Him. *"I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them"* (Ps. 91, 14-15).

It is Jesus who presented the picture of protecting wings with utmost clarity and in a most convincing manner: *"How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"* (Lk 13, 34). Jesus was lamenting over the people who failed to discern the time of God's visitation, and refused to listen to His call. Jerusalem was destroyed. The people were scattered. Let us take care that it does not happen to us.

02. WINGS OF MERCY:

Exodus 25, 18-22

“You shall make two cherubim of gold. You shall make them of hammered work, at the two ends of the mercy seat. ...the cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings... There I will meet you and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you my commands for the Israelites” (Ex 25, 18-22).

God has no form or shape but His spirit fills the whole creation. He has revealed Himself through various historical events, peoples and in many ways. The Church teaches that God’s revelation still continues. This revelation has a unique place in the history of Israel. God who called Abraham liberated his descendants from Egypt and led them through the wilderness. He made a covenant with this people on Mount Sinai, accepted them as His own people and promised to be present in their midst.

The Ark of the Covenant, they made according to the divine directives was the sign of God’s presence in their midst. The Ark, a small wooden box made of precious wood and covered with gold, contained the Tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. Those who obey the Commandments will experience the presence of God. In the ark, besides the tablets of the Ten Commandments, there was

also a jar of Manna and the staff of Aaron. Manna was to remind them of the miraculous way God fed and protected them during their pilgrimage through the desert. Aaron's staff was a sign of the sacred authority of the leader chosen and appointed by God. They reminded the people about their past, the way Yahweh liberated them from slavery in Egypt.

There was a golden seat above the Ark, called the mercy seat that was considered God's throne from which He would hear the prayers of the people and bless them. On both ends of the ark there stood a Cherubim with wings spread over the mercy seat. These wings symbolized the protecting presence of God. Eventually they were considered as the wings of God. The shadow of those wings would fall on the mercy seat. It is from this image such usages as "*under the wings of God*" and "*In the shadow of His wings*" came into existence.

During the journey through the desert, the Ark was carried along and when they encamped, it was kept in a tent. This tent was called the "Tent of Meeting", that is, the place for encountering God. When Solomon built the temple, the Ark was placed in the holy or holies. Only once in a year the High Priest entered there to offer prayer. Though people could not see the Ark, Cherubs and the mercy seat, these became symbols of God's protecting presence.

In the course of time the Ark was lost and the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed. However the symbol of protection under God's wings is still relevant and remains as a beautiful image. All who take refuge in Him will be protected. In the place of the Ark of the Covenant, today we have the Tabernacle where Jesus is present in the Holy Eucharist. All those who enter the Church can seek His presence and protection. May we experience His protection today and every day.

03. ON EAGLE'S WINGS

Exodus 19, 4-5

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my most treasured possession out of all the peoples” (Ex 19, 4-5).

The people of Israel were undergoing persecution and slavery in Egypt that they could have hardly have any hope of liberation. Still they kept on crying for an end to the misery and a change of the situation for the better. Eventually the Lord heard their cry. The oppression had reached its climax in the 13th century B.C., when Ramses II ruled over Egypt and Canaan, with an iron fist. Monuments to his power and glory still exist in Egypt in the form of temples and statues. The God who heard their cry, took note of their afflictions, and brought them out of the land of slavery overthrowing the mighty emperor, is known as **Yahweh**.

The people of Israel set out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. While they marched through the midst of the Red Sea on dry land, the Egyptian army who pursued them was drowned in the waters that returned to swallow them up. The people who miraculously crossed the sea were led through the desert by a pillar of cloud during the day and by a pillar of fire during the night. The Lord showered manna from heaven and let water gush forth from the rock for them. The words of God from

Mt. Sinai, presented as the preamble for the covenant: *“I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself” (Ex 19, 4-5)*, reminded them of the protection they received during their pilgrimage.

No bird can fly as fast and as high as an eagle. Bible uses the image of the eagle’s wings to assure that we are safe under God’s wings or in the shadow of His wings. Eagle’s wings is used to show the way God led the people from slavery to freedom, from misery and poverty to the Promised Land that flow with milk and honey. The book of Revelation uses this image to show how the persecuted Church enjoys God’s protection. The pregnant woman, representing the church on earth was chased by the dragon, representing Satan who is now working through the political powers that persecute the Church. But the woman *“was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly to her place in the desert” (Rev 12,14)*.

No danger shall fall upon those who take refuge in the Lord. The God who led Israel on Eagle’s wings to freedom and to the Promised Land would lead His faithful to the true Promised Land, the Kingdom of heaven. The Red Sea and the desert are symbols of obstacles and difficulties of everyday life. If we trust in God, we have nothing to fear. God will save us from all dangers and would carry us on Eagle’s wings to eternal glory. May this conviction strengthen us on our pilgrimage and enable us to face the trials and tribulations of the **daily** life with hope.

04. ON THE WINGS OF THE WIND

Psalm 18, 10

“He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind” (Ps 18, 9-10).

David is the greatest king that ruled over Israel. Even though Saul was the first king, kingship in Israel is known by his name: the kingdom of David. When God sent His Son as the redeemer of the world, he was known as the Son of David. Even though David was such a towering personality, before reaching the zenith of his glory, he had to go through many obstacles, difficulties and dangers.

After David, the young shepherd had killed the Philistine giant, Goliath and saved the life and prestige not only of the king but also of the people, Saul appointed him as his body guard. But later, blinded by jealousy and haunted by fear that David would supplant him, Saul sought to kill him.

David had to flee from the court, go into hiding and finally get out of the country in order to escape the vengeance of the monarch who turned into a maniac. Even after becoming king, he was plagued by war with enemies from outside and rebellion from inside, mainly, from his family. Fearing his own son, he had to flee from his palace and capital city; Jerusalem, amidst insult and curses from his people. In the midst of all the trials

and tribulations, David put his trust in Yahweh. An example of this can be found in Ps. 18. Second book of Samuel, Chapter 22 presents the same psalm with an indication about its historical background.

David composed the Psalm in memory of God's protection when he was surrounded by enemies. There was no one to help him and no place to hide. Having no way to escape, he cried out and the Lord came like a mighty storm in lightning speed. *"Mounted on a cherub he flew, borne along on the wings of the wind"* (Ps. 18, 11). Wind and wings, cloud and fire, thunder and lightning, are all symbols of the protecting presence of God.

There is no place where God cannot reach, no situation from which God cannot save. Wherever I may be, whatever my condition be, He hears my cry, sees my tears, and knows my sorrow. He is close to the broken hearted. *"See, the Lord's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear"* (Is 59, 1). When we feel that no one will or can help us and every one has turned away from us, we must trust that God will not abandon us. We might be counted as condemned to death by an incurable disease, or some other inescapable situation, but we should never give up hope. Open our hearts and minds to accept the Lord who comes on the wings of the wind.

The one who came like a storm into the Upper room where the disciples were gathered in prayer, the one who carried off Elijah in a whirl wind, would rush to our aid. He comes to snatch us from danger, to wipe away our tears. He comes not to punish or destroy but to liberate us from the bondage of sin, to heal our sickness, to gladden our hearts and finally to lead us to eternal joy. So be watchful for His coming on the wings of the wind. Listen to rustling of the Wind! He is near, He is coming to rescue. Take heart, it is The Lord, coming on the wings of the wind!

05. PROTECTION UNDER GOD'S WINGS

Ruth 2, 12

“May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge” (Ruth 2, 12)

She had lost everything. Her husband died at a young age, without giving her even a child. She had abandoned the idea of going back to her home and getting married again and so resolved to accompany and take care of her aged and widowed mother-in-law, Naomi. When Naomi decided to return to her native place, she had asked both her daughters-in-law to go back to their parental homes, get married, raise children and lead a normal and happy life. The advice was taken by Orpah, but Ruth resolutely remained with Naomi. She was a Moabite and her mother-in-law was an Israelite. Ruth was well aware of the risk of going to the land of Israel as a foreigner. The Israelites were not very friendly with those whom they called gentiles and considered as idol worshippers.

As a gentile widow she had nothing to expect for herself. She was motivated by nothing but love and fidelity to her mother-in-law. Her decision was firm and unshakeable: *“But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die — there will I be buried. May the LORD do*

thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" (Ruth 1, 16-17). Her faith and dedication was richly rewarded. Boas, the man who came forward to marry her acknowledged this quality in her. "May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge" (Ruth 2, 12).

Through the life of Ruth, the Bible teaches what it means to take refuge under the wings of God and what it brings. Ruth left her home and possibilities, to take refuge under the wings of the God of Israel. Such unselfish love and total trust was rewarded. God guided her and protected her. She was led to the field of Naomi's relative, Boaz who appreciated her internal and external beauty and married her. Finally she became the great - grandmother of David and so the ancestor of Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

Those who take refuge in God must have faith and be led by unselfish love. When we love without expecting anything in return, God would bless us. St. Therese of Lisieux said that she would love God even if there is no heaven. She would not sin even if there is no hell. She felt that God loved her so much and she would love God just for God, not for any reward. St. Therese and Ruth are models of taking refuge under the Wings of God.

06. UNTIRING WINGS

Isaiah 40, 30-31

“Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Is 40, 30-31)

King Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and led the people of Israel as captives to Babylon, some 2000 kilometers away. The Israelites in exile had lost everything - the temple was burned down, city devastated, and now they are slaves in a foreign land, similar to the slavery in Egypt. They had nothing to hope for. The Prophet Ezekiel saw them like a heap of dry bones (Ez 37). To this people God sent Isaiah a prophet of hope (Bible scholars attribute Is 40-55 to a prophet whom they call second or Deutero Isaiah).

The prophet assured them that God did not and will not forget His people. *“How can you say, Jacob, how can you repeat, Israel, ‘My way is hidden from Yahweh, my rights are ignored by my God?’” (Is. 40, 27).* God does not go away from us. One might fail to experience God’s presence due to one’s own infidelity and sins. During the dark moments of the soul, one might feel abandoned and rejected by God. Even Jesus on the Cross had gone through such an experience: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15, 34).* However, He did not give up hope when the Father did not respond. He breathed his

last saying *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Lk. 23, 46)*. This is the most beautiful example of taking refuge under God’s wings.

The prophet was asking the people in exile to have this kind of faith and trust. Darkness covers the earth not because the sun is not shining. Either there is a heavy cloud or the place we stand is against the sun. Isn’t this what happens in our lives? Unfortunate incidents and hurt feelings might cause us to consider God as cruel. One might begin to doubt and question the very existence of God when prayers are not answered. But, all these are quite natural in human life.

We are not called to remain just on a natural level. We are called to transcend to a higher level of faith. Under all conditions, we trust in God’s providence. Never stop praying even when we feel that God has abandoned us. Hold on to those hands with all the strength; God is our sole refuge. The Father who did not save Jesus from the Cross raised him from the tomb. The exiled Jews were brought back to Jerusalem. Our tears will be wiped away and the Lord will bring us back to joy, to health, to life. Then we would experience being lifted up on eagle’s wings. We will be carried on His wings until we reach home, our heavenly abode. One day we will see Him face to face. If we trust in God we will be strengthened and renewed. We will experience His strength. The Lord has promised through prophet Isaiah that *“those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles” (Is 40, 31)*.

07. WHEN THE NEST IS SHAKEN

Deuteronomy 32, 11

“As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young, as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him” (Dt 32, 11).

The eagle's nest is one of the strongest and safest nests built by the bird's family. They choose a very high spot, on top of high mountains, cliffs, or very tall trees to build their nests. First with strong sticks they would lay the foundation, on top of which they would lay small dry twigs and grass to create an even surface. Then they would spread their own tender feathers to create a smooth bed for the baby birds. Very carefully the eggs would be protected and hatched. The babies would be fed and nurtured with great care and love. However, when the babies have grown wings and are ready to fly, the mother bird would first spread and flutter her wings above them to show them how to fly. The babies would spread their little wings, but would not fly.

No matter how many times she shows how to fly and the baby spread its wings, it would not get out of the nest or venture to lift itself on its tiny wings. Then the mother would shake the nest violently. The baby bird would try to hold on to the twigs. Finally when the mother pulls away the last of the twigs and sticks, the baby would fall into the abyss like a stone. Then the mother would swoop down and catch the baby on her spread

wings and carry it to a high branch. She would repeat this feat many times. At last the baby would flutter its tiny wings and begin to float in the thin air and slowly move forwards. With that the flying lesson would be over.

This could be just a fictional, story told to teach a lesson. But this is a picture we get from the Bible. In this picture, the eagle stands in the place of God. The frightened baby holding on to the twigs and branches is none but us, the human beings. All the trials and tribulations of life can be seen as God's action, coaxing and forcing us to acquire strength and courage to fly. We have to use our muscles in order to make them strong. Recently we heard that a young man, who was unable to get up due to excess fat was lifted by a crane and carried down through the window and taken to the hospital – he weighed over 500 kilos.

Lack of exercise would make the body weak. Without encountering conflicts, mind would not become strong. Pampered children could become rebellious and go astray. It is to make us strong that God sends challenges on our way. When our nest is shaken and pulled down we must not panic but know that it is God who tells us that it is time to get out of the security of the nest and fly.

There is a saying that “sprouted in the fire will not wither in the sun”. One who grows facing conflicts will not fall apart when he/she faces difficulties in life. The mother shaking the nest might appear to be cruel but she waits with wings spread to catch the falling baby and bring it to safety. It is like wounding to heal. No matter what difficulty we encounter, the Lord would protect us. We fall not into the empty abyss, but into the hands of our loving Father, spread lovingly beneath us.

08. PEACE BE WITH YOU

John 20, 19

“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said: Peace be with you” (Jn 20, 19).

It was with great hopes and expectations that they had followed Jesus. The moment they met him, they felt so strongly attracted to his personality that they left not only their boats and nets but even their homes and relatives, to follow him. They never expected this kind of an end to that life of hope. All their dreams were shattered on that Friday as Jesus was raised on the Cross on Golgotha. The Jewish leadership accused him of blasphemy and the Romans convicted him of revolution and high treason. They experienced utter loss, total disappointment and intense fear.

The disciples feared that the religious and political leaders who annihilated their master, would come looking for them as well. Therefore they shut the doors and hid themselves from the public. The slightest sound or movement would make them shiver with fear. The first day of the week, day of hope and celebration, they were shut in total darkness. Those disciples are symbolic of all who experience fear and despair of any kind. They might be in the grip of illness, poverty, guilt feeling, conflict or any such negative experience and feelings.

You too might be finding yourself in a similar situation. It is time to open your eyes and see hope where there is no hope. All thought that everything was finished on that Good Friday. But, in reality it was not the end but the beginning; everything was beginning anew. What seemed to be utter defeat and total failure was in reality true victory.

The one who died on the cross has conquered death through his own death. The one whom they buried in the tomb closing it with a great stone, stood in front of them wishing them “Peace”. He assured them that he would be with them till the end of time. It is this presence that we experience as wings of safety. With total confidence, let us take refuge under those Wings.

09. ALWAYS WITH US

Matthew 28, 18-20

“Jesus came and said to them: All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28, 18-20)

Only the Gospels of Mark and Luke and the Acts of the Apostles describe the ascension of Jesus into heaven. The report of the ascension might give the impression that Jesus has gone away from us. But, John and Matthew explain the Ascension as a different kind of presence, a transcendent presence of Jesus among and with us.

Jesus entered into glory through His death and resurrection. In other words, again he put on the glory that he had set aside to become a human being. The Gospel of Matthew explains that sitting at the right hand of the Father is having authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus who bore all the sins and sorrows of mankind became glorified.

The one who took upon himself all the pain and sorrow, all the weakness and sins of humanity and died on the cross, rose from the dead in glory. By Ascension, Jesus was not going away but coming closer and being present forever, always and everywhere, with us all. This presence is beyond time and space.

The Greek word that is translated as “the end of time” could also mean “until all is completed”. It could imply the establishment of the New Heaven and New Earth. Until the total renewal of creation he will be with us. More than a promise concerning the future this is a statement about the present. He did not say “I will be with you” but “behold I am with you”.

Loneliness is a curse of the modern world. The number of those who feel lonely and isolated is on the increase. Not only the sick and the old, but even the young and physically healthy people feel alone and helpless. People feel alone in the crowds. The development of the means of communication has not succeeded in bringing people closer to each other. The phenomenon of being alone in the crowd is increasing. The only answer to this emptiness is, being present with Jesus who proclaimed that He will be with us till the end of time. To those who are carrying heavy burdens of sorrows that cannot be shared with any one, problems that nobody would understand, fears and anxieties that no one can take away, Jesus tells : “You are not alone, I am with you! That presence reaches deep into our hearts and follows us everywhere, even beyond the grave, reaching into eternity. May we experience His presence and become filled with strength and hope.

10. NO TROUBLED HEARTS!

John 14, 1

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe in me” (Jn 14,10).

In every way it was a different evening. The Passover celebration had turned into a troubled ceremony. The apprehension of an impending disaster filled the air. The Master, like a gentile slave, knelt down and washed their feet. Jesus had told them that it would be his last meal with them. The disciples felt that something terrible was going to happen and they were filled with sadness and fear. Jesus addressed their fears but they did not comprehend his words. Neither did they fully understand the meaning of saying that the bread and wine were His body and blood. Jesus foretold that one of them would betray him and all the others would run away from him. It was more than they could bear. But Jesus told them, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe in me” (Jn 14, 10).*

They must remember all that they learned from him during the last three years. Know that the upcoming passion and death on the Cross is not the end. He assured them that they would meet again as he had promised before. They must believe that their Master is capable of defeating death with his own death. They could not comprehend him and all the words were like undigested food for them. They have seen enough and more

signs to put their trust in the Master and believe His words; still they were troubled and thoroughly confused.

It is anxiety about the future that mostly troubles one's heart. The disciples felt that they were standing in quick sand. They were losing grip over their lives. Their lives would never be the same after this evening. With heavy hearts they listened to Jesus without understanding anything. They struggled to believe that they do not have to be troubled because their Lord and Master said so.

As we are troubled with various issues, Jesus keeps on telling each one of us not to be troubled, but to believe in God and in Him. Faith is the only antidote for the troubled minds. As our faith decreases, the mind would become more and more disturbed. Disturbed persons become nervous and make all around them nervous. Those who trust in God would experience calmness and calm the minds of those around them. They know that their lives move according to the plan of God and nothing would happen to them without the knowledge of God who loves them. Hence, nothing would disturb them.

Faith in Jesus leads to hope. The one who entered into glory through his passion and death would lead us beyond death to eternal life. Jesus shows the way to overcome fear and trouble: Believe, in God, and in Jesus. He, who died and rose from the dead, is with us as our friend and constant companion. He will help us, comfort and guide us to the Father's house. So, let us cast our cares into His hands and be happy and peaceful. May we open our hearts to experience the *PEACE the Lord gives us*.

11. STAY WITH US, LORD!

Luke 24, 29

“As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying: Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over. So he went in to stay with them” (Lk 24, 28-29)

That Sunday afternoon two of the disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about 12 Km. away from Jerusalem. All their hopes and dreams were shattered. They were depressed and despondent. With heavy hearts and sluggish feet they dragged themselves they forward. On the way a stranger joined them. They were too disheartened to recognize that it was the Master. Upon asking they shared their expectations and disappointments in Jesus when he was crucified and died, shattering all their hopes and dreams.

It is possible that we lose connection with the Lord within us when our minds are clouded and we are blinded by unexpected calamities and tragedies. During such times, someone walking with us, listening to our experiences would help to console our hearts. That is what Jesus did. He made them express their feelings, fears, disappointments, anxieties and hopes. They opened their hearts to this stranger who was willing to listen to them. After hearing all they had to say, Jesus made them reflect on the prophecies regarding the Messiah and all that their Master had foretold them about his passion and death.

As a result of their encounter with the Risen Lord, they were strengthened and moved from the feeling level to the thinking level. They became aware of the Divine plan in all that had happened. They did not realize how fast time passed and did not feel the fatigue of the journey. They did not know what happened to the fear and sorrow that was depressing them. That is what happens when Jesus walks with us. Each prayer, each meditation could lead us to such an experience.

Suddenly they saw they were at the gate of the village to which they were going. As they saw that the stranger was going on further they stopped him and requested “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” Naturally they were pointing out that it was already evening, the sun will set soon and the stranger will be on the road in the darkness. Obviously it is the compassion for the homeless wanderer that induced them to invite him to stay with them, over night. But in this story this invitation can have much deeper significance and implications. It could also point to the evening of life when death would shed its shadow in the path of life.

Walking with him, they realized, they did not know fatigue or fear. Their hearts were on fire with love and happiness filled their whole being. They would have liked to continue in this elated mood. For that, they knew this stranger should be with them. This might be another and perhaps the more important reason for the invitation: “Stay with us!”. This was a petition, a cry that sprang from the depths of their hearts. The Master will not, cannot, ignore such a cry and continue on his journey. So he went in to stay with them.

Upon entering the house the guest acted as the host. The stranger instead of receiving started giving them hospitality. He took the bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them.

Suddenly their eyes were opened and they recognized their Master. The encounter with the Risen Lord in the breaking of the bread gave them the realization that He is alive and present with them. Together with this they became also aware, how their hearts were set on fire and filled with gladness on the way. Their fears vanished; sorrow gave way to overflowing happiness. It is this realization that the Lord wants to impart to each and every one of us.

It was six months before his death, that Pope John Paul II wrote the apostolic letter, “Stay with us Lord - *mane nobiscum Domine*”. This letter is a beautiful exposition of the depths of the disciples’ request and its relation to the Eucharist. Let this prayer “stay with us Lord” be on our lips not only at the evening of our lives but at every moment of our life.

12. PEACE! BE STILL!

Mark 4, 39

“He woke, up rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm” (Mk 4, 39).

Sea of Galilee, though called a sea, in fact is a relatively small, heart shaped lake which is about 22 Km long and 13 Km wide. This is the great source of sweet water for Israel. The water of the lake is usually calm. Most of the people in the area, including the disciples of Jesus made a living by fishing in this sea that had plenty of very tasty fish. Hence, the apostles were familiar with the sea. They thought nothing of it when the Master asked them to go across the Lake. It happened so fast, so unexpectedly. The northern wind created a violent storm and the waves almost swamped the boat. Unaffected by all these, Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. Fearing the boat might sink, they woke him up crying: *“Lord, save us! We are perishing!” (Mt 8, 25)*. The boat that was about to sink in the windstorm could be a symbol of the Church tossed by violent storms of concerted attacks, persecutions, and scandals. It could be our world threatened with annihilation by various natural forces and man made catastrophes. It could be the nation facing serious threats form inside and outside its borders. It could be our own poor selves, troubled by anxieties and tormented by fears, temptations and delusions. We are the disciples screaming in fear over the roaring waves.

When we are caught up in the storm of trials and tribulations of life, we must not forget one thing: the Master who is capable of calming the storm and stilling the sea is with us. As the disciples did and the evangelist Mathew recorded, we too must pray “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” In fact it is not the Lord who is asleep and therefore has to be awakened, but it is ourselves that have to wake up. We must become aware of the fact that the Lord is with us and within us. We must keep in mind that *“He who keeps you will . . . neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps 121, 3-4)*. The hauling of the storm and the thick darkness surrounding us might block our vision of the Lord but, He can see us and He is with us.

Hearing the cry of the disciples, “He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” The wind stopped and the sea became calm. Cry out to the Lord with all your might! He will hear. We cry aloud not because he cannot hear but because of our fear, our heartache. What is most needed is a strong faith that He would hear our prayer. Even when I am tired of rowing this boat of life and feel that it is sinking into the bottom of eternal emptiness, I have to be convinced that the one who rebuked the wind and calmed the sea is within me. Cry to him, wake up to his presence! He will give us peace and lead us to eternal happiness that is heaven, the Father’s house.

13. I HAVE COMPASSION

Mark 8, 2

“I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance” (Mk 8, 2-3).

Jesus was speaking about the people who had come a long way to listen to him and to be healed of their physical and mental ailments. He taught them about the love of the Father, His care for each one and the coming of the Kingdom of God in their midst. With single minded attention they listened to him for three days, as if mesmerized by his words and by his presence. They were unaware of the passing of time. They wanted nothing but to listen to his words, experience his presence and just be with him, like Mary at Bethany.

Jesus did not look at the crowd as a faceless mass of people. He saw individuals, each with his/her needs, worries, hopes and fears. The Lord sees each one of us as persons with particular needs and qualities. He knows what we need. It is he who knows each one's need that says “I have compassion”. What is translated as compassion is the Hebrew word “Rahma”. The root of the word is “Rehm” which means “womb”. It signifies a mother's care for the child in her womb. The feeling Jesus had for the people was similar to that of a mother to her unborn child whom she is carrying in her own body.

There is a tendency to depict God as a cruel judge and a merciless father who is a strict disciplinarian. But, Jesus presented a totally different picture through his parables, miracles and above all his life and relations. The God whom Jesus presented to us is a loving, caring and affectionate Father/Mother. The Father knows our needs, weaknesses, our failures, our sins, the wounds we are carrying in our hearts, and looks upon us with tender, loving kindness. *“As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” (Is 66, 13).*

The words of Jesus “I feel Compassion” comes from this love. He protects me every moment of my life; saves me from dangers; feeds me with his own body and blood. We who have experienced this compassion must show the same compassion to others. Jesus said, *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (Mt. 5, 7); “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6, 36).* May the Lord help us to be compassionate to others.

14. NEITHER DO I CONDEMN YOU

John 8, 11

*“Jesus said: neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again”
(Jn 8,11).*

The last one of the three major feasts of Israel was the feast of booths. This feast was instituted in order to remember that they lived in the desert in tents when *“the Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night” (Ex 13, 21)*. Tens of thousands of people would come as pilgrims to Jerusalem for the feast. When there is such a big crowd all kinds of things, holy and some times not so holy, could happen at night even in the temple precincts. The drama the leaders staged that morning before Jesus was a proof of such an unholy action.

The Pharisees were strict about observing the laws and the scribes of interpreting them, and both agreed on imposing the Law of Moses in the society. They brought a woman caught in adultery and asked Jesus to judge her. Apparently they were proving their devotion and zeal for the Law, but in reality it was a trap they set for Jesus. If he condemns her to death, they could say that he was cruel and his preaching on mercy and love were empty words. Besides, he would be going against the Roman law that had reserved capital punishment to the Roman

court. If he sets her free, they could say that he does not follow the Law of Moses. Either way, they could condemn him.

The leaders had no concern for the woman. All they cared about was executing the letter of the law. Or rather that woman was just a bate fastened to the hook to catch Jesus and prove him guilty. All they saw was her sin and was determined to punish her. Many important questions were not asked and several issues were ignored: What made her the way she was? No one can commit adultery alone! Who was her partner? Where was he? Was he not equally guilty? Why did they catch one and let the other go free? Those who came with stone in their hands to throw at her did not ask any of these basic questions. When we pass judgment on others, we may be doing the same thing. That is why Jesus taught, *“Do not judge, and you will not be judged” (Lk 6,37)*.

Jesus just bent down and began to write on the ground. When they kept on insisting, finally he pronounced his judgment: *“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (Jn 8, 7)*. Who is without sin? Who has the right to condemn another person? One by one, the accusers dropped the stone and disappeared in silence. Most of the time the accusations we level against the other, are reflections of our own guilt and sin?

At the end only Jesus and the woman were left at the scene. In utter fear and trembling, she waited to hear his verdict. She could hardly believe her own ears when he said, *“Has no one condemned you?...Neither do I condemn you. ...go... do not sin again” (8, 10-11)*. He does not deny that she was guilty. The Master knows her real situation, but he does not expose her guilt and condemn her. He is not concerned about her past, but the present and future. Go, he said, into the world, to lead a new life.

That is Jesus, and that is the face of God he revealed to us. The God of Jesus is the merciful Father who does not keep an account of our past sins, but sees our hearts with compassion, is ever ready to forgive anyone who repents and lets them start again with a clean slate. He would wash away our sins and make us white as snow. The Lord rejoices over a repentant sinner and fills him/her with His unending love. Together with the sacred author, let us say, *“We will not sin, because we know that you acknowledge us as yours” (Ws 15, 2)*. It is neither fear of hell, nor hope of heaven, but pure love that should keep us from sin and prompt us to strive for perfection. Jesus asked us to be perfect as God our heavenly Father is perfect, which is interpreted as being merciful as our Father is merciful.

15. TAKE COURAGE! IT'S I!

Mathew 14, 27

“When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. “It is a ghost,” they said, and they cried out in fear. At once Jesus spoke to them, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid” (Mt 14, 26-27).

The whole day had been strange and exhausting for the disciples. Jesus had sent them out on a mission to proclaim the Good News and they were excited about the great things they were able to do in his name. They had no words to narrate all the marvelous experiences. He had decided to take the exuberant disciples to a lonely place for rest. But, when the crowd came looking for him Jesus forgot about the rest for which he had taken the disciples. He felt compassion for them and started to heal them and quench their thirst for the Word of God. As the day was ending, the disciples asked him to disperse the crowd but he proceeded to multiply the bread to feed them.

When the people realized that a great miracle had taken place, a miracle that reminded them of the Exodus event, the manna in the desert and the liberation under Moses, they decided that Jesus is the great liberator they were waiting for and decided to make him king. The disciples seem to have been excited by the idea and were also caught up in this revolutionary movement. But to their great surprise and disappointment the Master compelled them to get in the boat and to go across the lake. It

was the first time that Jesus sent the disciples away alone at night into the sea.

Soon, it was night and the sea raged with a storm. The boat was tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. The last time they had such an experience, the Master was with them. Now the Master is on the shore and they were alone in the middle of a wild sea. They became exhausted rowing but got nowhere. To add fuel to the fire, some time after midnight they saw a figure walking towards them over the waters, on top of the huge waves. Since no man can walk on the troubled waters like that, they feared that a ghost was coming to destroy them. Terror stricken, they screamed aloud. Then over the raging waters his voice resounded, "Courage, It is I".

They were too scared to recognize the Lord. Usually that is what happens to us also. When we are in danger, when we are scared, we might feel that we are alone and fail to recognize the presence of the Lord with us. Even the disciples who were so close to Jesus mistook him for a ghost. They were so overwhelmed by fear that they could not distinguish Jesus from a ghost. But we must remember that He will come, riding over the waves, on the wings of the wind, his voice resounding over the thunder of storm when we cry out to him.

We should be able to recognize the Lord who is with us, who comes to us to take us home safe. Even the disasters that strike us unexpectedly, events that come like *"terror of the night or arrow that flies by day"* (Ps 91, 5) can bring us rich God experience. It is precisely at the moment when we feel that we are at the end of the rope, that the ground we are standing on is dissolving under our feet and we are threatened with total darkness, that we will hear his strengthening voice and experience His soothing presence.

“It is I” has a deeper meaning. It is the name God revealed to Moses. It is the same as I AM. It is the same God who manifested Himself on the waters of Red Sea that now comes over the waves in the raging Sea of Galilee. The declaration “It is I – I AM” is not a vain assurance or empty word, but it is the declaration of the Almighty. Take courage! He will come on eagle’s wings, on the wings of the wind, to rescue His own.

16. WHY DID YOU DOUBT?

Mathew 14, 32

“Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Mt 14, 32).

The disciples caught in the wild storm were exhausted and frightened. They were deeply aware that Jesus was not with them and longed for his presence. At the most unexpected moment, about 4:00AM, the Lord walked towards them. The recognition that it was the Lord and not a ghost filled them with peace. But, why did Peter want to go to Jesus over the raging waters? Was he taking an unnecessary risk? Was there a hint of doubt in his question, “Lord, if it is you?” What was happening to him? Was he asking for a proof? Or seeing Jesus, was he overwhelmed with joy? Was it because he wanted to be with the Master that he asked for permission to rush over the waves?

Peter was always like that. From the moment he met Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, all he wanted was to be with the Lord. Drawn by a mysterious force emanating from the Master, he left everything and everybody to become His disciple and follower. He would do anything to be in His presence,

even jump into the raging sea. He heard the Master say “come” and without a second thought he jumped into the water in pitch dark.

The water kept him up as long as his eyes were fixed on Jesus and he moved with ease and speed to the Lord. But, as he became aware of himself and the waves breaking over his head, fear gripped him and he began to go down into the turbulent waters. The moment attention changed from the Lord to the self, Peter began to sink. As long as we keep our focus on the Lord, we will be safe. But if we become distracted and dissipated, if the faith is lost, then we are sure to go to the bottom of the sea.

Following Jesus is a risk. It is a journey through dark alleys and threatening waters. Only if we follow Him, trusting in His words and fixing our gaze always on him, will we ever be able to reach our goal. We should not be frightened by the enormity of obstacles; diseases and disasters could be the constant companions of the disciples; opposition and persecution might hunt us down but the Lord will not abandon us. Christian discipleship is the way of the cross. We must move forward anchoring our faith in Him, who is going ahead of us, and issuing the invitation: come and follow me! In all our trials and tribulations, He is with us.

As he was sinking Peter cried out: “Lord, save me”. Peter was not a hero, not a model of courage and unflinching faith. He was aware of his fear and weakness. So he was not ashamed to cry for help. His sole refuge was his trust in the Master. It is with such affection Jesus asked him why he doubted, not to accuse and condemn but to console and strengthen him. The Lord still asks us why we doubt. When we are in real trouble let these words of the Lord resound in our hearts: *“you of little faith, why do you doubt?”* Let us pray that He would strengthen our faith. He will not let us sink.

17. DO NOT WEEP

Luke 7, 13

“As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her: do not weep” (Lk 7,12-13).

A woman in deep pain and despair! She had nobody and nothing left. Her husband was already gone to eternal rest leaving her as a widow with a son. Now fate has taken even that only son, leaving her nothing but tears. The untimely death of her husband had already made her weak. Now the only reason for her existence is also taken away from her. Her future looked bleak and depressing as she would become the ward of her nearest relative. In Israel, this was the condition of a woman who had neither husband nor a grown up son. The society despised widows and barren women, interpreting it as a state brought about by their sin. This was the fate of the widow of Nain. All she could do was cry. The crowd that followed her to the grave, carrying the dead body of her young son could not console her. It was into this desperate situation that Jesus walked in.

Jesus too was accompanied by a crowd of his disciples and other faithful people who hung on to his words. He was coming from Capernaum, over 40 kilometers away apparently for the sole purpose of wiping the tears of that widow. The two processions, people who accompanied the dead body and the

people who accompanied Jesus, stood face to face at the entrance to the town. A confrontation of life and death: Jesus, the “Life” stood before the young man lying in the coffin as the incarnation of death!

Seeing the tears of the widow who lost her only son, his heart moved with compassion. The Greek word, *splanchnizzo* would point to a catch in the bowels. It is a deep emotion that involves the whole person, body and soul. The picture of God that manifests itself in Jesus is not that of an insensitive, unfeeling person. It is not an idol who does neither laughs nor cry. He is a person who shares our feelings with a motherly/fatherly heart. He can not only cry with those who cry but also wipe away the cause of those tears.

People often tell to the crying persons not to weep. But, who has the right to say, ‘not to weep’ when one is weeping because he/she lost a loved one; is affected by a mortal illness or lost everything in life? Here Jesus’ appeal to the widow, “do not weep” was not empty words of consolation but a command from the one who can eradicate the cause of those tears. Words turned into action. Words became flesh! At the command of the master, “Young man, I tell you: get up”, he sat up and began to talk. The widow got her son back alive and well.

He still repeats those words, “do not weep”, to every one with a broken heart! No matter what the cause of our sorrow is, he can wipe them away. He can fill the vacuum in our hearts. He can heal our mind and body. He would wipe away our tears as he can carry our burden; forgive our sins, freeing us from guilt, keeping us company in moments of loneliness and leading us to a life beyond the realm of death. We who feel His presence with us should be able to say to others “not to weep” because today He works through us. We are called to become

instruments in His hands to give comfort to those who are suffering, to wipe the tears of those who are crying.

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” (Rev 21,3-4).

18. NO ORPHANS!

John 14, 18

“I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you” (Jn 14, 18).

In the context of the last supper, Jesus made his farewell discourse. The disciples' hopes and dreams were centered on him. He called them out of their homes, took them around with him on his missionary journeys, called them friends and gave them special instructions and powers. He had saved them from dangers, fed them when they were hungry, and remained as the source of hope and courage at all times. They had dreamt that he would establish a new Kingdom but now he was preparing to depart. The awareness that they were gathered around him for the last time, for the last meal in his life on this earth, created a heavy atmosphere in the room. Though he had told them about his passion and death, they did not comprehend it at all. Now, the thought of continuing life without the Master, shocked them and saddened their hearts.

Jesus made two promises to ease their pain, to help them overcome this feeling of being orphans **1**. He would send them another helper - the Paraclete. The Greek word, “paracletos” means “one who is called to help”. To comfort, strengthen and guide the disciples, Jesus would send the Holy Spirit. **2**. Jesus Himself will return to the disciples. Though he appears to be going away, he would come back to them through his resurrection

and ascension. These promises are the source of hope and strength for the followers of Christ now as well as then.

How are these promises being fulfilled today? How does the Holy Spirit come to us? How do we experience that presence? The Lord abides in our hearts. If we listen with our hearts, we can hear His voice. He speaks to us in various ways.

When I am about to make a decision, I could hear his voice deep in my heart. Something tells me what to do and how to do it. When you turn to the right or to the left, you shall hear a word behind you, saying, *“This is the way; walk in it.”* (Is 30, 21). When I am going to do something wrong, a warning of the conscience would emerge in me. If I ignore that gentle voice and go against the warning, the voice of God would continue to act in me as guilt feelings, saying “you have done wrong”. When I encounter a person suffering, God would speak to me, awakening a feeling of compassion and inspiration to help. When I see injustice, the Spirit of God within me would fill me with a sense of righteous anger and strengthens me to voice my objection. When I feel lost and sad, His presence would be felt as a consolation.

Again and again He comes in a thousand ways, not only as one who consoles, guides, strengthens but also as one who asks my help as in reaching out to the, poor, the hungry, the sick, the stranger, the addicts, the condemned criminals and others. Let us pray that our inner eyes would be opened to see Him, hear Him and to walk through the path He shows us. May we become deeply convinced that He would not leave us orphans. He is with us. Let us be conscious of being with Him.

19. DO YOU WANT TO BE MADE WELL?

John 5, 6

“One man was there who had been ill for thirty eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him: do you want to be made well? (Jn 5, 5-6).

Jesus found him among the numerous people who lay at the pool expecting to be healed. The name of the pool is written in two ways. Some editions have translated it as “Beth-zatha” which means house of olive or garden of olive. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, there was an olive garden in that area and the pool got the name from it. But, in certain ancient manuscripts, it is called “Bethesda” which means house of mercy or compassion. This name would be more befitting to explain the nature of the pool.

Every once in a while there would be a stir in the water. The scientific explanation for the phenomenon could be that it was caused by a sudden gushing forth of water from an underground well spring. But, the popular belief was that at certain times, an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the water. After the stirring up of the water whoever stepped in first was made well from whatever disease he/she had.

The person in this incident had been sick for thirty-eight years. Though he was staying at the door of the “house of Mercy” for a long time, he received no mercy. He described his own pathetic condition to Jesus. There was no one to help him to

get into the pool first after the water was stirred up. He was well aware of his helpless situation. Jesus walked into his helplessness.

There are certain things in this story that deserve special attention. The patient did not ask Jesus for help. Neither did any one tell Jesus about this man. Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he needed help. The words **saw** and **knew** have special significance. *“I have **seen** the misery of my people... I **know** their sufferings” (Ex 3, 7).* God sees and knows the pain and suffering of the people. He knows full well the condition of each and every person. He knows everything, all my aspirations, anxieties, fears and desires.

To the man who was lying at a pool for 38 years Jesus asked: “Do you wish to get well?” As the years passed, he might have learned to live with his sickness. Apparently somebody was feeding him and helping him meet his needs. He might have gotten so used to being in that condition, that he lost hope and even the desire to get well.

The first condition of getting well is having the desire for healing. We must not resign to a helpless situation or illness thinking healing is not possible. We must never stop hoping. First of all, we must become aware of the factors that paralyze us. What is it that blocks the flow of vitality into my life and limbs? It could be physical illness; it could also be my attitudes, my guilt feelings, fears, regrets, complexes and many similar factors. All these negative thinking might be making me feel helpless, useless, worthless and hopeless. But, God did not create us to remain depressed and helpless. Then we should believe and trust that God will make us well. We must turn our eyes from our own misery to the merciful One standing before us. It is the One who is capable of making me well physically and spiritually that is asking me: do you want to be well?

20. GET UP AND WALK!

John 5,8

“Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk. At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk” Jn 5,8-9).

A totally unexpected turn of events took place. The man who was lying at the gate of the “house of Mercy”, waiting for healing for 38 years, had almost given up every hope of getting well again. He had resigned himself to the life of a paralytic, bedridden. He did not expect any healing; he was just waiting for the inevitable end to come to terminate his suffering and paralysis. It was into this hopeless situation that Jesus walked in with fresh hope.

Usually, Jesus would wait for a request from the sick person or some of their friends, before healing them. Most of the time, the healing was accompanied by a soothing and empowering touch. Here nothing of that happened. Nobody requested Jesus to heal the person. Even when asked, the paralytic did not say he wanted to be healed. He had only his complaints that there was no one to help him that he was all alone, that by the time he got near the water, some one was already in it before him. Jesus did not give him a consoling and encouraging touch. He did not respond to his litany of troubles with any kind word or sympathy. All he did was, give a command: *“Get up; pick up your sleeping-mat and walk” (Jn. 5,*

8). With those words, divine power descended upon the paralyzed body. The man who was bedridden for 38 years stood up, picked up his mat, and walked off. It was a miracle performed by the word of Jesus.

Such miracles are still happening. The word of the Lord comes to each one, who feels paralyzed in mind or body, challenging, demanding, commanding to get up and walk. However, in order to be able to respond positively to this command three conditions are required.

1. I must have the desire to be healed and to leave the present debilitating situation and current state of being. The first step in the process of healing is the desire to become free of one's illness, weaknesses, bad habits, sin etc.

2. I must believe in the divine power that works in me and gives me the capacity to get up and walk. Let the words of St. Paul, *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"* (Phil 4, 13) become an inspiration in our lives. The word of Jesus *"All things can be done for the one who believes"* (Mk. 9, 23) and the assurance of the angel, *"nothing will be impossible with God"* (Lk. 1, 37) must deepen our trust in God who strengthens us.

3. I must do what we can with utter earnestness. Our faith and desire can become fruitful only with our effort. Do our best to accomplish that which we strive for. Then pray that the Lord may bless our efforts and make them fruitful. The Kingdom of God is not a gift thrust upon the lazy but a gracious gift that God grants to those who do their best and pray ceaselessly (Lk 16, 16).

When we trust in God's providence and cooperate with His grace the Lord will bless us abundantly, making the impossible possible. We must bid farewell to our negative thinking as it

creates negative energy and puts stumbling blocks on our path to wholeness. Rely on God and experience the power of positive thinking. Allow God to work miracles in us. Yes, start today!

21. THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD:

Psalms 23, 1

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters” (Psalms 23, 1-2).

We draw events and images from our experiences to describe the indescribable and explain that which is beyond our comprehension. Thus the bible uses many images to speak of the invisible God. The good shepherd was one of the most beautiful and familiar images for the people of Israel and they used it to speak of God.

The ancestors of Israel were semi nomadic shepherds. Abraham, the father of faith, Jacob, from whom the name Israel derived, Moses who liberated them from the slavery in Egypt and David, the greatest king and ancestor of the Messiah were all shepherds. Hence the image of the shepherd was the most natural one that came to the mind of the people of Israel

The image of the shepherd gives a very palpable and convincing answer to questions such as: who is God, what does He do for me, what is my relation to God? Psalm 23, a psalm of confidence, confessing one's relation of dependence and trust in God is a psalm that one should learn by heart and pray every morning. It presents a beautiful picture of what the shepherd does for his sheep: leads, guides, feeds, protects, gives rest and fills one with a sense of security and happiness.

When I am convinced that the Lord is my shepherd I would feel strengthened and hopeful. As the shepherd cares for the sheep, my Lord cares for me. It is the shepherd who leads the sheep to the green pastures and running waters. He would protect the sheep and provide them security. He leads them through safe paths. In short, the shepherd gives everything the sheep needs.

When the Lord is my shepherd I would lack nothing. I will have no fear of famine or enemy. I might have to walk through deep valleys where danger lurks and death sheds its dark shadows but no harm will fall upon me. All I have to do to receive his protection is that I follow him. I must not break away from Him or ignore His call. Trusting that He would lead me to the restful waters, I must follow Him.

The shepherd has a staff to guide and a rod to protect the sheep from enemies. The long staff which has one end bent like a hook is not only a walking stick but also an instrument to guide the sheep in the right path and keep them from going astray. The rod is the weapon the shepherd uses to chase the enemies away. Both, his rod and his staff assure my safety and give me protection. As long as I follow the path on which He leads me, as long as I walk in the light of His Word, I have nothing to fear. So day after day, every morning I will sing: *“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing”*.

22. JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

John 10,1-18

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep” (Jn 10, 14-15).

There are two types of shepherds: The owners who tend their own sheep and the hirelings who work for a pay. The former ones care for and protect their sheep as their own precious possessions, whereas the latter ones might have no love or care for the sheep. What happens to the sheep would be none of their concern as they are interested only in their pay and nothing else. The hirelings, who are called the wicked shepherds, kill and eat the sheep he wants but do nothing to protect the flock from enemies or wild animals. The good shepherd on the other hand would be willing to sacrifice even his very life to protect the flock.

This image was used to criticize the activities of some political and religious leaders who use people for their own personal advantage. Prophet Ezekiel depicts a very clear picture of these two kinds of shepherds in the following passage. *“Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured,*

you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (Ez 34,2-4).

After recounting the cruel ways of the selfish and wicked shepherds, the prophet proclaims that the Lord will send a good shepherd: *“I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd” (Ez 34, 23).* Or rather the Lord Himself will come as the good shepherd: *“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak” (Ez 34, 15-16).*

The fulfillment of these promises can be seen in Jesus who presented himself as the Good Shepherd. In fact, this is one of the most beautiful images Jesus used to describe the nature and purpose of his mission. He is the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep individually, calls them by name, protects them from dangers and searches for the lost ones. He knows each one of us personally. He has carved our names in the palm of his hand.

Jesus’ relationship to each one of us is personal. For Him I am not an anonymous number in a crowd, but an individual person whom He knows intimately and treasures dearly in his heart. He knows me through and through, and loves me unconditionally. He saves me from dangers. He heals me when I am sick. He leads me to the living waters, which is the Holy Spirit, the source of divine life. He nourishes me with his own body and blood and leads me to my Father’s home. When I am lost, he would come searching for me. He offered his life to save his sheep. He came that I may have life, and to have it abundantly.

There is no shepherd like the Good Shepherd, Jesus. There is no leader and redeemer like Jesus. There is no friend like this

friend who offered his life for me. In his hands my life is secure because he will protect me from all my enemies. I must rejoice and be thankful in having Jesus as my shepherd and friend. “*The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*” (Gal 2.20). Therefore I have to be careful not to wander away from his protecting hands and become prey to thieves and wolves. The Holy Spirit will enable us to recognize the traps set in our paths by the powers of evil. In order not to fall into them we must keep close to the Good Shepherd.

23. THE LORD IS MY FORTRESS:

Psalm 18, 2

“I love you, O lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Ps 18,1-2).

We are always in the midst of dangers and our life is constantly under threat. The drastic changes in the earth's climate, earthquakes and tsunamis, global warming and floods and all such natural calamities affect the entire world and humanity. As the medical science improves and succeeds in defeating many diseases new and more lethal forms seem to appear everywhere. As we develop new and more effective methods of food production we see an increase of hunger and famine in the world at large. Even as new inventions in the communication system bring the whole world as close as the finger tip, persons seem to be more isolated and engulfed in loneliness.

As modes of transportation improve, accidents are being multiplied. In spite of the many desperate endeavors on national and global levels, terrorism sponsored and fuelled by political ideologies and religious fanaticism, is threatening to destroy the social harmony and peace all over the world. No one is left immune to these natural and man made calamities and disasters. Where can we find protection and security?

What is given as the title of this meditation is an answer to

all these threats and fears. It is taken from Psalm 18, a prayer King David composed to praise God for the protection he experienced. Seven images are presented here one after the other in order to depict the protection God provides: source of strength, rock, fortress, deliverer, shield, horn and stronghold. The different images point to different life situations and each image has its own special connotations. One of the important images is that of a fortress.

A fortress stronghold is relevant in the context of war. They are usually built on hills and will have surrounding walls; even up to three outer walls will be protecting the fortress. Around the walls, they would have moats. Draw bridges will be built across the moat to enter the citadel through the gate. For further protection watch towers are built on all four sides of the fortress. Day and night sentinels will stand guard on the towers. Once they spot the enemy from afar the watchmen will blow the trumpet and alert the people about the approaching enemy force. The people of the countryside will run to the fortress for safety. The army will stand ready to defend the fortress. The gates will be closed, and all the draw bridges will be pulled up.

Those who are in the fortress are safe and secure. It will be very difficult for the enemy to approach them. However, as history has proved again and again the tallest walls will be scaled or pulled down and the deepest moats will be crossed. But God gives a greater protection. David is extolling God's protection from his own experience. Even when all man made defense systems fall apart and succumb to invading forces, the protection God gives will never give way. Those who take refuge in God will have no reason for fear. It is not by building empty defense systems, be it walls and moats or rockets and missiles that we find safety, but trusting in God who is our true fortress.

24. THE LORD IS MY ROCK

Psalm 31, 2-3

“Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name’s sake lead me and guide me; take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge” (Ps 31, 2-4).

Fortresses are usually built on the mountains to make it easier to spot the approaching enemy from a distance. Building them on the rocks would give added security and strength to the fortress. Hence these two images are used together in order to depict the ultimate protection God gives us. The attributes of rock are emphasized in the Bible. Rock stands for firmness, stability, safety, protection, life without end. A sensible man builds his house on the rock. *“Rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and hurled themselves against that house, and it did not fall: it was founded on rock” (Mt. 7, 25)*. If we build our life (house) on God (rock), it will last forever. If not, I will be acting like *“a stupid man who built his house on sand. Rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and struck that house, and it fell; and what a fall it had!” (Mt. 7, 26-27)*. The Psalmist says *“He alone is my rock and my salvation; my fortress, I shall not be shaken” (Ps 62, 6)*.

It is God who gives protection from the enemy. Though there is no comparison to the protection God gives, it can be understood through the kind of protection the rock gives. No

enemy can approach a person who stands on top of the rock in a high place. Horses cannot run over the rock. No one can run over a rock that is slippery. So the person who stands on the rock is safe. It is this kind of protection that God gives us from our enemies. Who is the enemy? In the biblical language enemy is the power of evil that is called devil, Satan. Ultimately enemy is the one who creates discords and divisions among people, destroys peace and kills the soul.

When the living God is my rock and my salvation, no enemy can defeat me. God is my rock who leads me beyond death. There are various kinds of enemies. St. Paul gives a rather exhaustive list of such enemies: *“Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these” (Gal 5,20-21)*. When assailed by such enemies God is our refuge. *“He folds me in the recesses of his tent, sets me high on a rock” (Ps 27, 5)*.

The Bible talks about a rock from which water flowed (Ex 17, 1-6). When the people complained for having no water, God told Moses to strike the rock with his staff. When he did so, water gushed out. The Israelites believed that God alone was that rock. There is a rabbinic tradition that this rock followed the Israelites as long as they were in the desert. St. Paul refers to this tradition: *“they drank from the spiritual rock which followed them” (1 Cor 10, 4)*. St. John also seems to refer to this tradition when he writes: *“One of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance; and immediately there came out blood and water” (Jn. 19, 34)*. Jesus is compared to the rock from which the living water, namely the Holy Spirit gushed forth. God is the rock who protects and sustains us, quenching our thirst with life-giving waters. Firmness, protection, and eternal life - all these are meant by the symbol of the rock. *“He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken” (Ps 62, 6)*.

25. THE LORD'S TENT

(Psalm 15, 1)

“O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?” (Psalm 15, 1).

The ancestors of the people of Israel, the patriarchs, were semi nomads who lived in tents. They were shepherds and moved from place to place in search of greener pastures to graze their sheep. Wherever they went, they lived in tents. Hence putting up and dismantling the tents was part of their lives. Liberated from Egypt, Israel reached the foot of Mount Sinai where they became the people of God through a covenant (Ex 24. 1-8). God asked them to build a tent to keep the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 26). The Israelites carried this tent, all through their journey to the Promised Land and considered it as a sign of God's presence in their midst. Through this tent and the ark in it, the Lord traveled with them, led them, protected them and guided them. Since the people went to the tent to meet God, to enquire His will and receive messages, it was called also the “tent of meeting”.

When they settled in Canaan, the tent was kept at various shrines such as Gilgal, Bethel, Shiloh, Ramah etc. Finally King David brought it to Jerusalem. Later, Solomon's temple replaced the tent and the ark was kept in the Holy of holies of the temple. However, the tent was considered as God's house.

Temple or Tent is the visible sign of God's presence in our

midst. A place of worship belonging to any religion, such as a mosque, a synagogue, a church or a temple, must be respected and protected. Thirsting for God, people go to the place of worship, and so it should be kept as a place of worship. With whatever name one calls, it is always the same God who responds, because there is only one God.

A pilgrimage to Jerusalem temple was the greatest desire of every individual who believed in Yahweh. That is why the Psalmist said: *“I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord!”* (Ps 122, 1) and *“a day in your court is better than a thousand days elsewhere”* (Ps 84.10).

The tent of the Lord is an image, a symbol that reminds us that we are all pilgrims, on our way to the Father’s house. Even if we build permanent temples in the place of Tents, we remain pilgrims as we are constantly moving towards our eternal home. All the houses we see on our life’s journey are only places for a temporary stay, like a motel or a wayside inn, a place to rest, to refresh, to put down our sorrows and burdens. Having regained strength we must go on, like the river to the ocean, like a traveler to his home.

God’s house is not the structure made of stone or wood. Ultimately it is the human heart where God dwells on the earth. Even when we fail to go to the Church outside, we must enter deep into our hearts; enter your “room” as Jesus said. There and only there we will find rest and strength to continue our pilgrimage.

We must also recognize the indwelling presence of the Lord in each one’s heart. Precisely because of that every human person, irrespective of caste and creed, color and race must be respected and cared for. We must remember that wherever human beings are exploited, ill treated or ignored and left to starvation, it is

God himself who is ignored and insulted: *“Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Mt 25, 45). “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” (Acts 9, 5).*

26. WHEN THE TENTS ARE DESTROYED

Jeremiah 4, 20

*Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste.
Suddenly my tents are destroyed, my curtain in a
moment.” (Jer 4,19-20).*

Tent is a place of protection and security. In the desert it protects one from the scorching heat and suffocating sandstorm. At night it provides protection from drenching dew. Hence tent is a symbol of refuge and protection. It is also a place of communion, a place where the kith and kin gather and feel at home.

There are, however, moments when one feels that all these are being lost. The verse cited above as title is the prophet's lament at such a moment of disaster. He felt the sharp pain piercing his heart. *“My anguish; my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war” (Jer 4, 19).*

As if in a vision, the prophet saw the impending invasion by Babylon. He saw the enemy marching in full force against Jerusalem, the walls of the holy city crumbling under the incessant bartering of the war machines; palaces, mansions and simple houses all being pulled down; streets turned to pools of blood and filled with corpses, the Temple of the Lord going up in flames, thousands of the citizens being lead out as slaves into

distant lands. His ears were filled with the deafening screams of the wounded and dying. He saw it all so vividly as if happening right in front of his eyes and he himself was immersed in this total disaster even though the actual events took place only decades later, in 587 BC. This vision filled the prophet with pain, anguish and terror, bringing him to the brink of a heart attack: He was benumbed by pain and fear, unable even to cry: *“O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!”* (Jer 9, 1)

It is not any of his personal loss but vision of the impending disaster and the awareness that it could be avoided if the people were ready for conversion that immersed him in such deep sorrow; he took upon himself the pain of his people. The misfortune will fall upon them because they fail to live according to the commandments, terms of the Sinai Covenant. Leaving the living God, they went after idols. *“My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water”* (Jer 2, 13). The knowledge that through repentance and renewal of life, they could have avoided this disaster increased his pain. In despair, he implored cried out: *“Return, O faithless children, says the Lord, for I am your master”* (Jer 3, 14), but they refused to listen to him. Seeing the people rushing into the vortex of disaster, he could do nothing but cry: *“Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are destroyed, my curtains in a moment”* (Jer 4, 20).

The fall of the tent is a symbol. It can point to the life as a tent. There could be occasions when we feel our tent is falling apart and the curtains are torn to pieces. Personal disasters - mortal illness, tragedies, loss of dear ones, being abandoned or even betrayed by the ones whom we counted as closest friends

and relatives, and many similar or more tragic events could bring us to the brink of despair. Not only personal but also common, national tragedies and calamities could put us in such a situation. On such occasions we might feel that everything is lost.

Are we able to cry for our people? Do I cry when I see them going away from God, turning against the neighbor, falling victim to hatred, brutality and wickedness? Can I, do I, forgetting my own needs, intercede for people? My tears and prayers, my words and deeds should be such that they lead all to repentance and conversion. *“If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (Is. 1, 20).* Finally if and when the tent is broken I must cry to the Lord, flee to Him, turn to him and take refuge under His wings.

27. THE LORD IS MY TENT

Revelation 7

“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7, 14-17).

The tents are usually round in shape. There will be a central pole and pegs all around to tie the sheets of wool or animal skin. St. Paul was a tent maker (Acts 18, 3). The centre of the tent is elevated or exalted like the sky that reminds us of heaven. This in turn gave rise to the image of heaven as a tent.

The picture of God dwelling in the midst of the people as in a tent was an endearing image for the people of Israel. Just as the tent built by human hands give protection from sun and rain, so God protects His people in the Tent that is the sky and the universe. The sky is like an immense blue canopy of a tent fastened on the horizon. The Book of Revelation goes a step further and presents God Himself as the tent.

The temple and the tent of meeting were presented as the

dwelling place of God. The Bible teaches that our life on earth is just a temporary stay as living in tents. While we are on this pilgrimage of earthly life God dwells in our midst. Walking ahead of us, He shows the way. Not only that, our very body is a tent in which an immortal soul resides. When our soul leaves this temporary home, God will receive us in His eternal Tent (2 Cor 5, 1-14; 2 Peter 1, 14; Lk. 16, 19). The image presented in the book of Revelation is more endearing than all of these.

We can take refuge in the Tent that is God. God is not building a tent for us but He Himself is becoming the Tent in which or under which we can dwell. The rain drops that fall into the river and the rivers flows into the ocean merge and become one with them. In a similar fashion God is our ultimate destiny, our final aim, our home, our Tent. God will come down from heaven and will dwell among us for ever (Rev 21, 3); and we will dwell in Him. *“I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21, 22).*

Through death we enter definitely into the Tent of God. Then there will be no more pain, no more sorrow, no more death and no more night. Every tear will be wiped out; weeping will stop and give way to singing of praises. Sorrow will be turned into gladness. This is the picture of God as the tent, the bible presents before us.

“I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb. The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and to it the kings of the earth will bring their treasure” (Rev. 21, 22–24). When the history of salvation reaches its end God will live among the humans, or rather humans will live in God. This is God’s promise; this is our ultimate hope. May the Lord give us the grace to draw strength from this hope and enable us to meet the

trials and tragedies, temptations and tribulations of this life, till the new heaven and the new earth appear and God becomes our tent for ever.

28. THE LORD IS MY SHIELD

Psalm 28, 7

“The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped, and my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him” (Ps 28, 7-8).

The people of Israel had to engage themselves in battle very often. Right from the very beginning their history is marked with battles and wars. They had to engage in constant wars just for survival as a people, to take possession of and keep the land as their own. With the sole help of his servants, Abraham fought against five kings and their armies in order to free Lot who was taken prisoner. Jacob wrestled with God and earned the name Israel. The people had to engage themselves in battle, under Joshua's leadership, in the desert as well as in the inhabited land on their epic march to the Promised Land. David fought numerous battles, first to protect the land from invading enemies, then to expand the territory and ensure security in the borders.

Most of the time, they had to fight with enemies who were much stronger in numbers and weapons. The people of Israel trusted not in the number of the soldiers or in the quality of their weapons, but in the Lord their God who protected them. They believed that they can defeat any enemy if the Lord is with them. Hence one can hear the clash of weapons and noise of the battle cry in their confession of faith as well as in their prayers. A military language is used even when they speak to and of God.

When Israel was forced to confront enemies ten times stronger than them, they had no one but God to turn to for help. That is why they called God, *“My refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust”* (Ps 91, 2). This faith was strong from the time of Abraham: *“Fear not, Abram! I am your shield”* (Gen. 15, 1). All through the history of Israel, the only security they had was in the Lord and so God was considered a shield and armor.

When the battles were fought using sword and spear, bow and arrow, the soldiers would use shield and armor to protect themselves. Armor, made of iron strips, chains and leather would cover their entire body. This kind of defense gear, however, was introduced only later in Israel. The only instrument they had to defend themselves in the ancient times was the shield.

There were various types of shields. Usually the shield would be either square or round. It was made of wood and covered with leather. There was a handle inside for them to hold it firmly. While fighting with sword and dagger they used a relatively small shield. In order to defend from attacks with spear and arrows they used a bigger shield. While laying siege to a city, in order to protect themselves from stone, slings, fiery arrows and other similar weapons soldiers would use much bigger shields. Irrespective of the shape and size, it is the armor and shield that protected the soldiers. Even when the armour is hit by the weapons, the person behind will be safe. That is what God does for us.

We are under constant attack from various enemies. The real enemy is Satan, who assails us with temptations of greed, pride, frustration, despair, evil inclinations, passions, enmity and hatred. St. Paul calls these feelings *“fiery arrows of the enemy”*. This in turn reminds one of the Roman soldiers who used to shoot arrows with fiery heads that would pierce as well as burn.

Only God can give us protection from the constant attack by the enemies of body and soul.

St. Paul advises us to use the shield of faith to protect ourselves from enemies: *“always carrying the shield of faith so that you can use it to quench the burning arrows of the Evil One” (Eph. 6, 16)*. God is the shield that would protect us from all kinds of dangers. Jesus took upon himself all our wounds and healed us, *“ours were the sufferings he was bearing, ours the sorrows he was carrying... We have been healed by his bruises” (Is 53, 4-5)*. As the shield, takes upon itself the blows and wounds that would have hit the person wearing it so does Jesus protect and defend us. So I will sing with the psalmist: *“You, O LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head” (Ps 3, 3)*.

29. THE LORD WHO COMES WITH US

Exodus 33, 14

“The Lord said to Moses: I myself will go with you and give you rest” (Ex 33, 14)

Mount Sinai is very important in the history of the people of Israel. It was on Mount Sinai that God revealed himself to Moses with the name Yahweh and sent him out with a very difficult task: *“I am sending you to Pharaoh, for you to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt...I shall be with you” (Ex.3, 10-12)*. He was to liberate the people of Israel from the slavery in Egypt. After much struggle and the mighty intervention of God, Moses accomplished the task. He brought the people to the foot of Mount Sinai.

The mission of Moses did not end there. He was to help them to make a covenant with God and lead them to the Promised Land. But, more troubles awaited Moses. While he was on the mountain conversing with God and receiving the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the people at the foot of the mountain were worshipping the golden calf they had made for themselves. They forgot all that the Lord had done for them. This ingratitude and apostasy brought down severe punishment upon the people. The Lord said to Moses: *“Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation” (Ex 32,10)*. But, Moses on the mountain began to intercede for the people *“why*

should your anger blaze at your people, whom you have brought out of Egypt by your great power and mighty hand?" (Ex 32,11). Again Moses pleaded: "And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us?" (Ex 33,15-16). Moses is praying for God's continued presence not for himself alone but for the whole people.

When God entrusts a task, He would give the grace and strength to fulfill that mission. All through the Salvation history we can see this. God said to Jacob who was fleeing from his brother: *"Be sure, I am with you; I shall keep you safe wherever you go, and bring you back to this country, for I shall never desert you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen 28,15). After Moses it was Joshua who led the people to the Promised Land. God gave the same assurance to Joshua also: "I shall be with you as I was with Moses; I shall not fail you or desert you" (Jos 1, 5). God will go in front of us to lead us; He will go with us to strengthen us. He will hold our hand to assure us. We can trust God's promise, He would never abandon us.*

The task we are entrusted with might be difficult and dangerous, but we do not have to fear because He will be with us. Prophet Jeremiah was appointed over the nations and kingdoms, with a mission to uproot and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. God promised to be with him all through this dangerous mission: *"Do not be afraid of confronting them, for I am with you to rescue you" (Jer 1, 8). The Blessed Virgin Mary who was called to be the mother of the Savior was assured: "Rejoice, you who enjoy God's favor! The Lord is with you" (Lk 1, 28). No matter how difficult and risky the task is, God will remain with the person whom He calls. Even though it may appear that we are doing the work, in*

reality, it is God who acts **and** accomplishes His task in and through us. We are only instruments in His hands.

However God does not infringe upon our freedom. Only if we allow Him to work in and through us, we will become His instruments. For this we have to abandon ourselves into His hands. We must constantly listen to His voice and obey the Spirit that speaks in the depth of our hearts: *“And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it” (Is. 30, 21).* As long as we listen and obey His words, we are safe. To listen to Him, we have to remain attuned to the gentle whisper within us. Moses was alone on the mountain when he heard the voice of God. It was when he stood alone on the mountain, in front of the cave, that Elijah heard God’s voice and received the new mission (1Kings 19,13). We must find time to be alone with God in solitude to listen to Him.

If we close our ears to His voice, we might lose His presence. There are many such negative models in the Bible. God had entrusted a great mission to Samson but the Spirit of God left him because of his continuous unfaithfulness. Saul was the first King of Israel, specially chosen and anointed; the Spirit of God had come upon him powerfully, but he was rejected and the Spirit left him because he became blind with jealousy and stopped following the way of the Lord. All these are warnings for us to remain faithful to Him. Let us stay close to Him, listen to Him, and hold on to his Hand!

30. EVEN IF THE MOTHER FORGETS

Isaiah 49,15

“Zion was saying, “Yahweh has abandoned me, the Lord has forgotten me.” Can a woman forget her baby at the breast, feel no pity for the child she has borne? Even if these were to forget, I shall not forget you” (Is 49, 14 – 15) .

The people of Israel deported to Babylon were in distress. In the year 587 BC the army of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon demolished the city of Jerusalem burnt down the temple and lead away Zedekiah, the last king of Judah and thousands of its citizens together with their leaders to the far away Babylon, as captives. Cast out of the Promised Land they were in slavery, as in Egypt. The entire history of their liberation and redemption was apparently wiped out.

They felt that their history has come to an end. Everything was lost. and God has abandoned them for ever, they thought. In deep distress they searched for an answer to this tragic end. Various reasons were found and interpretations were given for the disaster that had befallen them. Some thought they were totally rejected by the Lord: *“Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me”(Is 49.14)*. A reason for this rejection was found in the guilt of the ancestors: *“Our ancestors sinned; they are no more, and we bear their iniquities” (Lam 5, 7)*. The thought that they were cast out of the Presence of the Lord

and the Lord would never remember them again was more than they could bear.

At times, we also might feel the same way with various crises in our lives. It might be that what ever one undertakes end up in failure and loss. There might be disasters in family or personal life, such as an incurable illness, repeated accidents, constant failures in business leading to bankruptcy, breaking up of family ties, loss of friendship, addiction to drugs, abuse of alcohol and many others. When misfortune falls upon us, one after another, it is quite natural to think that God is punishing us not only for our own sins, but more so for the sins of our ancestors.

These feelings might be aggravated by preachers who try to instill fear and repentance quoting passages from the bible about the curse of generations. This kind of preaching coupled with the personal experience of disasters makes one convinced that one is rejected by God for ever, without any hope. But one should never forget that such negative thoughts are temptations rising not from the Spirit of God but from the evil one.

One has to be cautious that *“Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2Cor11, 14)* and mislead people even quoting the Scripture. The tempter had approached Jesus asking to turn stones into bread or performing a spectacular miracle by jumping from the pinnacle of the temple, quoting appropriate bible passages. Nothing that leads to despair comes from God. It is Satan who first tempts people suggesting that “it is not sin” and once they have fallen, fills them with hopelessness by creating the illusion that there is no way out.

God sends his prophets and messengers to comfort the afflicted. He will never abandon us or forget us. *“Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have*

inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me” (Is 49,15-16). This conviction is proclaimed by the psalmist: “Though my father and mother forsake me, Yahweh will gather me up”(Ps. 27,10). Though Israel sinned and was punished, Yahweh did not forget them. Once they were in exile in Babylon, prophets were sent with message of comfort and hope. “I did forsake you for a brief moment, but in great compassion I shall take you back. In a flood of anger, for a moment I hid my face from you. But in everlasting love I have taken pity on you, says Yahweh, your redeemer” (Is 54, 7-8).

To the people who had attributed all their misfortunes and disasters to the sins of their ancestors, the Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah: *“In those days they shall no longer say: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge” (Jer 31,29-30). The concept of the corporate personality by which the guilt of one person was attributed to the whole nation and the children were held responsible for the sins of the parents was corrected, especially during the exile: “Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children for their fathers; only for his own guilt shall a man be put to death” (Deut 24,16). Jesus has redeemed us from all sin and curse; trust in his love. God loves us more than a mother loves her child! He is with us at all times.*

31. IN PRISON

Genesis 39

“When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, this is the way your servant treated me, he became enraged. And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison” (Gen 39, 19-21).

Joseph was severely punished, at home and in Egypt, for crimes he did not commit. At home his brothers hated him because their father loved him most. They even tried to kill him but then decided to sell him as a slave. From the slave market, an official, Potiphar bought him. His dedicated service so pleased the master that he made Joseph the supervisor of all his affairs. The wife of Potiphar became angry with him because he resisted her attempt to seduce him. Potiphar believed the lies of his wife against Joseph and put him in prison. Thus, one after another, misfortune haunted Joseph, though he did nothing to deserve the punishments he received. This might be the story of many.

The pain and anguish of the accused person, who is not able to prove his/her innocence, will be deep and hard to explain. The question why such a thing happens to me may lead to another question: Why does God allow this to me? If there is a God then why does He not prevent such injustice? Why doesn't He punish the wicked? One might even be tempted to question

the very existence of a God of justice and mercy. The question of the suffering of the innocent is as old as human history itself. The book of Job is a dramatic presentation of this question.

However, the Bible does give an explanation for the suffering of Joseph. In Gen 39 there is an affirmation the sacred writer repeats three times: *“God was with Joseph” (Gen 39, 2. 21. 23):* In all his troubles and tribulations God was with him. It was God who saved his life when his brothers tried to kill him. God was with him when he stood in the slave market for auction and caused Potiphar to buy him and later to be pleased with him. It was God who strengthened him to resist the evil desires of his master’s wife, enabled him to endure the suffering in prison, prevented him from succumbing to despair, inspired him to interpret dreams and finally raised him to the highest dignity, second only to Pharaoh in the whole land of Egypt. God made him an instrument in sustaining the lives of many, including his jealous brothers.

All these show that everything in our lives happen according to the plan of God. People may try to imprison us through lies, false propaganda and evil accusation. We may be weighed down by a sense of shame. But, we must never give up. The Lord who came to proclaim liberty to the captives is with us and will deliver us. The unhappy events could be a means of purifying and preparing us for greater missions. Hence, we must not give up but remember what Joseph said to his brother, *“do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Gen 45, 5).* God has His own purpose for everything that happens in our lives. We would realize them only much later. But, always remember that the one who came to liberate the oppressed is always with us.

32. BETWEEN THE SEA AND THE ENEMY

Exodus 14

“Moses said to the people: Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still” (Ex 14, 13-14).

Moses was asking the impossible when he asked the people to remain calm and still. It was with great joy and excitement that the people, who were liberated from the slavery and cruel treatment of the Egyptians, followed Moses. They witnessed the power of Yahweh through the miracles Moses performed to make their liberation possible. Enduring the hardships of the long march in the desert, they moved forward, hoping to settle in the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. But, now everything seemed to have been in vain. Or rather was God trying to trick them into a trap, to wipe out their very existence from the face of the earth, they wondered.

The route chosen was neither the shortest nor the easiest. If they had traveled north by the Mediterranean Sea coast, they could have reached Canaan in a few months. *“Now, when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the Philistines’ land, though this was the nearest; for he thought, should the people see that they would have to fight, they might change their minds and return to Egypt. Instead, he rerouted them toward the Red Sea by way of the desert road” (Ex 13, 17 – 18).*

Seeing the Pharaoh's army closing in on them, the Israelites trembled. In front of them was the Red Sea. Behind was the army of the enemy. They felt trapped with no way to escape. Considering this a trap set for them by God and Moses, they became angry and violent: "*They said to Moses: Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness*" (Ex 14, 11)?

This kind of crisis could happen in our lives also. Even the decisions we make after much deliberation, prayers and consultation could lead to crisis. It might be related to family, health, study, job or matters of much greater dimensions, of national and international consequences. We might feel ourselves trapped with no exit. But, if we wait, trusting in God's providence, unexpected paths will open before us. "*Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again"*" (Ex 14,13). This kind of experiences would help us deepen our trust in God and our conviction that it is He who guides our lives.

Moses trusted that God had a purpose in all these events and He will never abandon His people to perish in the desert. When, obeying the Lord's command, he stretched his staff over the sea, waters parted. A dry path appeared in the middle of the sea. The people walked to safety. This became a great moment of God's revelation for the people and the greatest manifestation of God's saving power.

God's saving power is at work every moment in our lives. Those who have the eyes of faith will recognize miracles happening every day. Jesus taught us not to be afraid or anxious of any thing: "*He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear... your Father knows that you need them"*"

(Lk 12,30). If we trust in God, obstacles that rise like mountains in our path will vanish (Mk 11,22) and we will be able to journey safely to our Father's home. Take courage, you will experience His power and care.

33. IN THE FIERY FURNACE

Daniel 3

“They walked around in the midst of the flames, singing hymns to God and blessing the Lord” (Dan 3, 24)

Humanly speaking there was no hope for the three young men who were thrown into the fiery furnace as a punishment for deliberately breaking the law enforced by the great king Nebuchadnezzar. Infuriated by their defiance of the royal edict the king had ordered the furnace to be heated up seven times more than was customary so much so that flames leapt 20 meters high above the furnace. The soldiers who bound and threw those three men, Shadrach, Meshac and Abednego into the blazing fire, were consumed by the flames. It was absolutely impossible for any living creature to survive in this furnace, not to speak of escaping from it. But what was humanly impossible did happen. God intervened in their favor because it was on account of their fidelity to God that they were given this punishment.

King Nebuchadnezzar had issued an edict that all the subjects in his empire, when they hear the sound of the trumpet and the special music should fall prostrate and worship the huge golden statue that he had set up. Any one who refused to do so would be thrown alive into the fiery furnace. This was a great challenge for the people of Israel, living in Babylon as exiles.

The three young men belonged to the Jewish community in

exile. It was the king himself who had appointed them as civil servants and entrusted them with high offices. However they considered it more important to obey the laws of the Lord than obeying the order of the king. They were aware of the extreme consequences of this disobedience, but they were not afraid. They did not just evade the command in secret, but publicly refused to worship the statue, confessing their faith in the true God.

When brought before the king and put on trial they declared: *“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up”* (Dan 3,16-18). That was their firm, irrevocable decision. They stuck to the first commandment that prohibits idol worship, and were ready to risk their lives for their faith.

They confessed with their word and deed that the king and his laws were subject to, not above, God. The story ends with the miraculous protection the Lord gave to the three who risked their lives for Him: *“But the angel of the Lord came down into the furnace to be with Azariah (this is the Hebrew name, whereas Shadrach is the name given to him by the Babylonians) and his companions, and drove the fiery flame out of the furnace and made the inside of the furnace as though a moist wind were whistling through it”* (Dan 3, 49-50). The protection granted to them by the God they worshiped caused the king to repent and believe in Yahweh, as the only true God.

The story of the three young men thrown into the fiery furnace is presented in the book of Daniel, a book written towards the end of the first half of the second century BC during a severe persecution. Antiochus IV, the Syrian king who was

ruling over Israel declared himself Epiphanes, God manifest, and demanded that all his subjects worship him as God. The Jews who refused to comply were subjected to severe persecution. The sacred author who wrote the Book of Daniel wanted to strengthen the faith of his people and encourage them to remain faithful to God, defying the king's laws and accepting even death. Behind the picture of Nebuchadnezzar, there lurks the image of Antiochus and the idol worship he tried to propagate and enforce. The three young men are models of fidelity to God and resistance to idol worship.

The experience of the three young men has a very important lesson for us. It shows what the attitude of a true believer should be towards the ideologies and policies that try to enforce immoral laws and eradicate faith in God from the hearts of people. Public disobedience and open resistance to the atheistic and anti-God laws and regulations, promulgated through legitimate authorities, will necessarily involve great risk. One might risk not only losing a job, wealth and freedom but even life. However every true believer has the duty to resist such laws and try to change them.

Natural, moral laws are more important than the laws of the state. No one has the right to enforce laws that endanger the lives of the innocent, be they terminally ill, yet unborn, physically or mentally challenged or in any way handicapped. One has to resist and defeat the culture of death that is being propagated as the exaltation of individual human rights. Every one, even those in civil and administrative service has the duty to stand for life and faith in God. The story of the young men kept safe in the midst of raging flames should be a source of inspiration and encouragement.

God sent his angel or came down himself, into the fiery furnace, giving protection to those who risked their lives for their faith. He will do it again today: "*Should you pass through*

the waters, I shall be with you; or through rivers, they will not swallow you up. Should you walk through fire, you will not suffer, and the flame will not burn you (Is 43, 2). This is an assurance given to all of us. It must strengthen us to fight against injustice and evil powers that persecute or hurt the people who are just, poor or needy. We are not alone in the struggle against the powers of evil: God is with us.

34. IN THE LIONS' DEN

Daniel 6

“Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you. A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of the lords so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel” (Dan 6, 16-17).

The story presented in Chapter 6 of the book of Daniel shows how those who put their trust in the Lord will experience His protection. The Book of Daniel was written to inspire the Jewish people to remain faithful to the Lord and their religious practices amidst the cruel persecution unleashed by, the Syrian king, Antiochus IV, in the first half of the second century BC. The present story narrates the experience of Daniel, a Jew living in Exile, whom the king Darius had appointed in one of the highest offices in the kingdom. Daniel was a just and conscientious officer, never tolerating any form of injustice. This strict and honest character of Daniel together with his extreme fidelity to the king won him the greatest appreciation of the king and made him the most trusted officer in the kingdom. This position of Daniel provoked the jealousy and hatred of his colleagues and subordinates, who plotted to do away with him.

Since they could not find anything to incriminate Daniel, they set a trap from which even the King could not save him.

They knew that Daniel would never neglect his daily prayer and that he would pray only to his God. Hence they induced the king to make a law forbidding his subjects in the entire empire to worship or pray to any one other than the king, under pain of death by being thrown into the lions' den, for a month. This was a senseless and useless law as it did no good to the king or to the people, except give the king the appearance of a god. All that the royal servants wanted was to get rid of Daniel who had become a speck in their eye and a pain in their neck. Without considering the consequences, the king signed the law and immediately it came into effect. King Darius was heart-broken when he realized that they had tricked him into signing a stupid law that would destroy the life of his dearest and most respected officer, Daniel.

All through the history we can see such laws. It would be impossible to know the number of the victims of religious persecutions on various pretexts. Totalitarian and atheistic regimes that try to eradicate faith in God from the hearts of the people through brutal oppression is not only a story of the past but also of the present. What happened during the time of the Nazi rule in Germany, with the French, Russian, Chinese and many other revolutions, the terrorist attacks in New York and Bombay, the violence against Christians by Hindu fanatics in Orissa, the brutal oppression of people of another religious perception by the Islamic terrorist organizations under the pretext of defending their own religion through draconic laws are all examples of the mentality manifested in the story of Daniel and the law promulgated by Darius under the influence of corrupt officials.

Such officers are not extinct today; nay they seem to be on the increase. The cases are not rare when corrupt officers try to set traps for their just and honest colleagues and superiors. Some

politicians turn against their rivals whom they consider as obstacles to their dreams of power and profit and so a threat to their very existence. Victimized honest people by smear campaign through the media, creating mass opposition through spreading lies and false accusations, discouraging and dissuading honest people from the path of justice, seems to have become the order of the day. Immoral laws encouraging and even enforcing murder of innocent unborn children and terminally ill, educational policies that propagate atheism through the official channels of the government are only some of the numerous examples of the new laws of Darius. The story of Daniel is meant to resist such social evils.

It was customary among the Persians and Medes that once the law was officially promulgated not even the king could repeal or change it. Hence Darius felt compelled to throw Daniel in the Lions' den. To ensure the death of Daniel, they made sure that the lions were starving for days. Every body thought the fate of Daniel was sealed with the sealing of the pit of the lions. But, all their plots were defeated by the powerful intervention of the Almighty God. Daniel responded to the King who came the next morning to see what had happened to him, *"My God sent his angel who sealed the lions' jaws; they did me no harm, since in his sight I am blameless"* (Dan 6, 22). Daniel's example encourages the just and God fearing to stand for God and His laws.

God will protect those who trust in Him, beyond every imagination. His power will rescue us, from death, as is shown from the empty tomb of the Easter morning. The tomb was sealed, as the lions' den, and guarded by soldiers. But the stone was moved from the face of the tomb and the dead one walked out alive. Fear not, don't lose hope, God is with those who stand firm for truth and justice

35. CAUGHT IN DEATH TRAP

Daniel 13

“Susanna sighed. “I am trapped,” she said, “whatever I do. If I agree, it means death for me; if I resist, I cannot get away from you. But I prefer to fall innocent into your power than to sin in the eyes of the Lord” (Dan 13, 22-23).

Susanna was in a life threatening crisis. As a rule, beauty and grace are gifts from God. But, they became the cause of mortal danger for Susanna. Attracted by her extreme beauty, the two judges compelled her to surrender herself to their passion. She knew that she had no way out. When justice is denied for the poor and innocent the court is their last resort. But if the very judge, who is supposed to vindicate the wronged person, himself induces a person to break the law, bears false witness against the one who refuses to comply with this demand and finally pronounces the judgment of condemnation, then there is no hope left for that victim. There is no one to whom that helpless victim can turn for help.

Susanna was in such a trap. Her story narrated in the Book of Daniel, Chapter 13, is situated in Babylon among the exiles from Israel. The name Susanna means lily, a synonym of purity and innocence. *“Her parents were righteous, and had trained their daughter according to the Law of Moses” (Dan 13, 3).* Two judges, newly appointed for the Jews living in exile, were corrupt and morally depraved. They were frequent visitors at the wealthy

home of Joachim, husband of Susanna. Susanna's beauty and gentleness attracted the attention of these wicked Judges. Burning with passionate desire, they waited for an opportunity to fall upon her. Such an occasion presented itself when Susanna who came to walk in the garden with her maid decided to take a bath in their family pond. As she sent the maid away to fetch the toilet articles she was left alone in the garden.

The evil judges, who were lying in wait, confronted her and compelled her to give in to their evil desire. The trap was set and she had no way of escaping. There were no witnesses except the two judges who compelled her to sin. If she complied with them, she would sin against the Lord. If she resisted, they would accuse her of committing adultery, a crime to be punished with death by stoning. She decided to give her life into the hands of the Lord and resist the judges. "*Susanna groaned and said: I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape from you. I chose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord*" (Dan 13,22-23) She was in the same situation as the men thrown in the furnace and the young man thrown to the starving lions.

Susanna did not succumb to the temptation. Neither did she surrender to pressure. She resisted with all her might, using the only weapon left with her: she cried aloud! The judges shouted even louder creating a situation of utter confusion. The people who gathered to hear and see what was going on, believed the story of the judges. Susanna's reputation was tarnished. Her husband and family had difficulty to believe that she would commit such an act but had no way of proving her innocence. The next day Susanna was put on trial. The accusers, witnesses and judges were all the same two persons. They pronounced the capital punishment - death by stoning. The Judges were victorious for having their revenge, at least they thought.

Such incidents are plenty even today. How many innocent people are publicly exposed to ridicule and contempt, sentenced and imprisoned while the real culprits go scot-free! People with power, influence and authority get away with murder while the innocent get caught and are punished. While unfounded accusations, false witnesses, blackmailing, political manipulations etc. victimize the innocent, biased media make an event of such “scandals” and people revel in the misery of the victims with evil pleasure.

Susanna was not given a chance to defend herself. All doors of escape were closed before her. She stood there in the courtyard of her house, in the midst of her family in tears, weighed down by shame and carrying the burden of a sin she did not commit, while the crowd shouted for her blood. However she did not give up her hope and trust in the Lord. Again she used the only weapon she had at her disposal: her voice. She cried aloud. It was a confession of innocence, a declaration of faith and a challenge against the unjust judges: *“She cried out as loud as she could, ‘Eternal God, you know all secrets and everything before it happens; you know that they have given false evidence against me. And now I must die, innocent as I am of everything their malice has invented against me’ (Dan 13, 42-43).*

The people did not heed this desperate cry. Those who were resolved to kill her followed her with stones in hands to the place of execution, the judges leading the pathetic procession, like a way of the Cross. But God heard the cry of the innocent victim who put her trust in Him, and sent His prophet Daniel. “My judge is God” is the meaning of the name.

“I want no part in shedding this woman’s blood” (Dan 13, 46), a Youngman shouted from the crowd. It was a solitary voice in the murderous tumult of the crowd, but that lone voice was powerful. He did not join the majority and decided to raise his

voice against injustice. Truth prevailed; the judges trembled. By a fair trial Daniel established the innocence of Susanna without a shadow of doubt, and exposed the wickedness of the judges. The punishment they had pronounced over Susanna was meted out to them. As Daniel became the voice of the voiceless, all are called to stand for justice.

36. ANGEL IN THE PRISON

Acts 12, 1-6

“On the night before Herod was to try him, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, fastened with two chains, while guards kept watch at the main entrance to the prison” (Acts 12,6).

Herod Agrippa I was the king of Palestine from 41 to 44 A.D. He was the grand son of Herod the Great who had tried to kill Child Jesus, and the son of Aristobulus, whom Herod the Great had killed. He beheaded the Apostle James, brother of John. Seeing that it pleased the Jews; he took more aggressive steps against the Christians. He imprisoned Peter with a plan to kill him after the Passover. Herod appointed four squads of soldiers to guard him. Peter never dreamt of an escape as he knew that there were three doors that were guarded day and night by soldiers. He assumed that he too would be killed like James. However he slept peacefully, between two soldiers, fastened with two chains. He was at peace because, dead or alive, his life was in the hands of the Lord.

That is the faith he kept and trust he cherished from the day he left the boat and net, and followed the Master. At a moment of weakness, he denied Jesus about which he cried for the rest of his life. The memory of that failure, kept him humble and capable of understanding the weakness of others. In reparation for his denial of three times, Jesus gave him opportunity to affirm his love for the Lord, three times. The Lord filled him

with courage and forewarned him, “*You will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go*” (Jn. 21, 18). Jesus was promising that he will have an opportunity to offer his life for the Lord whom he denied once because of his fear and cowardice. Hence, Peter surrendered his life to the plan of the Lord.

Peter did not lose heart in the face of death because he believed in Jesus and in His Word. He knew that nothing would happen to him without the knowledge and consent of the Lord. So he could sleep in the prison, bound with heavy chains between two soldiers, not fearing the violent death awaiting him. Nothing can disturb a person whose life is anchored in Christ, who has said: “*In the world you will have hardship, but be courageous: I have conquered the world*” (Jn 16, 33). That is the attitude we need to develop in our lives.

While Peter was sleeping under guard all the Christians gathered together in a house were praying to God for him unremittingly. The Christians have an obligation to pray for their brethren who are under going suffering and persecution. The angel of the Lord appeared in the prison and woke Peter up. The chains fell from his hands and feet; the gates of the prison opened before him, he was led out of the prison and brought to safety. Nothing, not even death can destroy the freedom of the one who trusts in the Lord. This is the source of our hope in the face of obstacles and life threatening dangers.

37. CHAINS FALL OFF

Acts 16, 16- 40

“After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened” (Acts 16, 23 – 26).

Philippi was an important Roman colony, founded in 356 B.C by Philip II, king of Macedonia and father of Alexander the Great. He called the city by his own name and made it the capital of his kingdom. It was the first European city where Paul preached the gospel and founded a church. The people of Philippi proved to be steadfast in their faith and love for Paul. Of the 13 canonical letters of Paul, the one he wrote to the church in Philippi is the most beautiful, personal and overflowing with affection. Acts 16 narrates one of the incidents in which the apostles experienced God’s protection.

Based on some false accusations, the magistrates had them stripped and flogged. All they had done was cast out an evil spirit from a slave girl. But, there were some people who were making money, using the girl and they were furious that they

lost the source of income. Hence they went to the court with false accusations against Paul and Silas. Without any trial they were badly beaten up and put in prison. The accusers did not tell the court the real motivation behind the accusation. The judges did not make any enquiry; the plaintiffs were not given a chance to explain themselves.

Where the Good News of the Kingdom of God is effectively preached, the people would definitely experience changes in their convictions and actions. Superstitions would give way to true knowledge and charitable operations in the society. In fact the society would experience a radical change. People would become aware of the dignity of human beings and that would lead to mutual respect and appreciation. Such changes will necessarily have its impact on the socio economic system and hence will provoke conflict. Paul and Silas were considered a threat to the existing social order that was enslaving the weak and ignorant, and thriving on exploitation. The owners of the slave girl are the representatives of a socio-economic system that is threatened by the proclamation of the Gospel.

They were not afraid of yet another god; they had already hundreds in their pantheon. What they were afraid of was this new religion, new faith and a new world view that the Christian missionaries were proclaiming. It was not so much Jesus as a god that was opposed, but the Kingdom of God Jesus preached as it demands an integral liberation, universal brotherhood and absolute equality to all the peoples. This is what happens even today wherever Jesus and the Kingdom is preached. This, we see in the systematic opposition and persecution against the Church and her missionaries, be it from the part of atheistic ideologies, totalitarian regimes, or religious fanatics. The latest example of such repression, organized by leaders who felt threatened by the spread of Christianity and the consequent social

change and liberation of the oppressed and poor, can be seen in the massacre in the district of Kandamal, Orissa.

Paul and Silas were beaten up, tired and weak. They did not know what their judgment would be. But they did not complain; they were not afraid. But, they felt a profound joy in being persecuted in the name of Jesus and sang praises to the Lord. Their songs and praises in the middle of the night became an inspiration for their fellow prisoners. It was their faith in the Lord Jesus that enabled them to rejoice even in the midst of suffering. They had kept the words of the Lord in their hearts: *“Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven; this is how they persecuted the prophets before you” (Mt 5, 11-12)*. The only reward Jesus promised was suffering in this world and eternal life after death.

Experience of thousands of Christians under persecution proves that even today it is possible to be happy and sing praises, considering suffering for Christ’s sake as a special gift and not a tragedy. Such an attitude is the most convincing testimony to faith and those who see it will be influenced to believe in Jesus.

When the apostles in chains sang praises in the middle of the night God’s mighty Hand was manifested. The earth shook, chains fell from their hands and the prison gates opened by themselves. Those who witnessed acknowledged Jesus as the Lord and found salvation. The God who worked the miracle for Paul is eternal God who continues to act even today, in His own way and time. It is not the show of power that brings about transformation of the heart but suffering and ardent prayer.

38. REVELATION IN PRISON

Rev. 1, 9-10

“I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet” (Rev 1,9-10).

Patmos is a rocky island with very little fertile soil, in the Aegean sea, about 50 km west of Turkey. This is a very small island, only about 16 km long and 10 km wide. Today it belongs to Greece. Only about 3000 people live there now. It is a tourist center from May to August. The main attraction on this island is a cave where the apostle John received his visions and wrote them down, the Book of Revelation.

During the first century A.D., Patmos was one of the islands to which Romans used to banish people whom they considered criminals. The prisoners were sentenced to do hard labor, especially work in the quarries. They had no way of escaping these islands; they were condemned to die there in exile.

Emperor Domitian, towards the end of his reign (AD 81-96) unleashed a severe persecution against the Christians all over the empire. The Church in Asia Minor was the worst hit. John the only apostle still surviving, the bishop of the metropolitan church of Ephesus, was exiled to the Island of Patmos. Thus in

his old age, he ended up in the prison camp with no hope of escape.

John sat in the cave, weary and broken by all that was happening to the Church and what was going on in the world. Suddenly he went into a trance. The heavens opened above him and the history unfolded before him. He saw everything - past, present and future, as if on a silver screen. God's plan of salvation unfolded in front of his eyes. John obeyed the voice that asked him to write down all what he saw and heard. Thus we have the most enigmatic and at the same time the most beautiful book of the bible, the Book of revelation

The Book of Revelation unravels the mystery of salvation and interprets the meaning and goal of history of the world. In fact the book presents a theology of history for a people persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ. It was in the labor camp of the exile that the apostle John received the revelation that the Roman emperor who claimed divinity and demanded divine worship for himself and persecuted those who refused to comply, was the embodiment of evil and an instrument of Satan. The conflict between the Church and the empire is in fact a conflict between good and evil. The persecution unleashed by the emperor is the last attempt by Satan to wipe out the Church, the quintessence of good from the face of the earth. Even though evil might appear all powerful and invincible, the last word about the history of the world is not with Satan but with God, the apostle realized, in the cave of revelation.

History of the world is a history of perennial conflict between good and evil; it will continue till the end of the world. The empire, the incarnation of evil, apparently is powerful, with all the weapons of destruction under its control; it is like the serpent with seven heads and ten horns. The Church on the other hand might appear to be fragile like a pregnant woman in labor. But

appearance deceives. For in reality good is more powerful as the pregnant woman who is the symbol of hope and future. The good will have the ultimate victory because God has entered the history of humanity, definitively, and has defeated evil through the sacrifice of Jesus the Lamb.

The Apostle recognized that the persecution including his imprisonment must be seen as birth pangs for the new heaven and new earth. Thus, the prison on Patmos Island became a place of revelation, shedding light in the dark paths of history and giving hope to the entire humanity. “God himself will be with them; He will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev 21, 3-4). John saw the New Heaven and New earth where there will be no pain, no tears, no death and no darkness. Domitian was killed in conspiracy and persecution ceased for the time being. John’s exile and imprisonment lasted only 18 months. The hope that emerged from the Revelation still remains with us. Thus, prison became the threshold of hope.

39. WHEN THE FIG TREE DOES NOT BLOSSOM

Habakkuk 3,17

“ Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will exult in the God of my salvation” (Hab 3,17-18)

Prophet Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah. He preached in Jerusalem when the people of Judah were facing a very serious crisis. Nineveh, the capital of the mighty empire Assyria, fell in B.C. 612. Babylon became the unchallenged super power of the Middle East. Nebuchadnezzar, the emperor of Babylon, in pursuit of the expansion of the empire started his move toward west. One by one the small kingdoms surrendered. Dark shadow of defeat and gloom fell over Judah. Many of its towns were captured and destroyed by the advancing Babylonian army. Jerusalem was under siege. Habakkuk was one of the prophets of the last minute, sent by God, to call the people to conversion before they met total annihilation.

The prophet had the very difficult task of preaching the Word of God to a people appalled by the disaster, a people terrorized by seeing all their dreams dashed to the ground, and their very existence threatened. He could not provide any convincing answer to the questions of the people: why do the innocent perish while the wicked flourish? Why is God being silent when His people in danger cry out to Him? However, the prophet

does not waver or question God's justice and mercy. He only confesses that God's plans and dealings are mysteries and beyond his comprehension.

The mystery of God's silence, however, does not lead him to despair or silence. His unshakable conviction that God's plans are always for the good, gives him hope, opening new horizons before him. God will surely intervene in history, executing justice and saving the oppressed. What we have to do is only to wait patiently for the time of God; His Kairos is approaching fast.

Health and wealth, prosperity and long life are all gifts from God and we must thank and praise God when we receive them. But what are we to do when all these are denied? When prayers remain unanswered? When life looks like a journey uphill with sickness and suffering? When we are constantly defeated in all our endeavors and chased by disasters, we ask: why God? and God gives no answer. Habakkuk stands at the forefront of such a people who are desperately seeking God's answer.

The prophet is using the language of a farmer in describing a life that is falling apart. If all the fruit trees remain barren, if all the livestock are dead, then how is the farmer to survive? What should one do when all the hopes and dreams are brutally shattered by unexpected disasters? Where can one turn to, for help and inspiration?

A similar situation is presented in the book of Job. Job was a God fearing and devout man, very wealthy and happy. All of a sudden he lost everything including his ten children, all his wealth and even his health. His body was filled with sores and turned into a stinking mass of rotten flesh. His wife advised him to curse God and die. But Job had a different attitude, rooted in faith: "*If we take happiness from God's hand, must we not take sorrow too?*" (Job 2,10)

Habakkuk teaches that we must be able to praise God and rejoice in the Lord even when we lose everything and face an utterly bleak future. In the midst of apparent disasters we should not lose sight of the true life beyond this world. Each and every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and called to be with Him, happy for ever. All our suffering in this world should be considered as tests and training that purifies and prepares us for that eternal life. Suffering is an invitation to participate in the Cross of Jesus. The Bible preaches not a gospel of prosperity but the gospel of the Cross that leads to the glory of resurrection. Jesus invites us to take up our cross and walk behind him on the way to the Father's house that passes through Calvary. That is the only gospel Jesus proclaimed and the only gospel the Church teaches: Rejoice in the Lord who redeems.

40. UNFAILING LOVE:

Lamentation 3, 22

“The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gal! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him” (Lam 3, 19 - 24).

Babylonian Captivity is an important and significant event in the Salvation history. The army of Nebuchadnezzar, the emperor of Babylon, laid siege to the city of Jerusalem, and put them on in a strangle hold leading them to utter starvation. It created untold suffering for the people. They ran out of food and water. The famine was so severe that the living sustained their lives by eating the dead. Finally in B.C. 587, after a siege that lasted over 18 months, the Babylonian army breached the wall of Jerusalem and entered the city. The king and the leaders were captured and deported to Babylon with thousands of captives. The people of Israel, thrown out of the Promised Land, were heart broken. The book of Lamentation depicts the traumatic experience of the people.

They lamented that they lost everything. The city was destroyed. The temple of God became a heap of ashes. The people of Israel are cast out of the Promised Land. They thought

that the Lord who brought them from the land of slavery with a mighty hand and out stretched arm and bestowed on them the rank of the chosen people, has abandoned them for ever. All this was more than they could bear.

Memories of the tragic experiences were like poison for them. What is there for them now to hope for? This could be the experience, not only of the deported people of Israel, but of any one. Losing all that one had gained in a life time could be a terrible shock. The feeling of being abandoned even by God can make the pain unbearable. Memories of the past, especially of one's personal sin could be like an arrow stuck in the heart. People who believe that all the misfortunes and disasters are the punishment God is inflicting upon them for their sins as well as for the sins of the ancestors, could end up in utter despair.

This was the situation of Israel living in exile. However, the exile was a time of soul searching. The question, "why has God abandoned us?" leads them to ponder deeply on their personal as well as collective history, and brought them to the realization that they have broken the Covenant. The loss of the Land as well as the exile was considered as a just punishment for their sins. This was a time of profound conversion, holding on to the Lord, hoping against hope.

The book of Lamentations finds a ray of hope in the midst of the encircling gloom, in the unfailing love of God. God loves His people with an everlasting love and would remain faithful to the Covenant He made, even when people are being unfaithful. One fails to experience God's love not because God does not love, but because one closes one's heart to God, as darkness falls upon the earth not because the sun does not shine but because either the earth turns away from the sun or because clouds prevent the rays from reaching the earth. The prophet exhorted the people to open their hearts in faith to God and

every morning they would experience His love afresh. This is true for each and every one of us. It is we who move away from God and then lament that God has abandoned us. We must open our inner eyes to experience the God within us.

The prodigal son moved away from his father and father's house. That was the cause of all his suffering. Finally the love of the Father brought him back and restored his position in the family. The father who was waiting for his return never ceased to love him. This teaches that God would never abandon us. God's love is ever lasting.

41. BETHEL

Gen 28, 18

“Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place--and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven... He called that place Bethel” (Gen 28, 16-18).

Jacob sleeping by the wayside was a defeated man physically exhausted and spiritually crushed. He was trying to flee not only from his angry brother who had vowed to kill him, but also from his own guilty conscience, accusing him for dealing treacherously with his father and brother. Before he could reach anywhere night overtook him. Overcome with fatigue, he slumbered into a restless sleep, a symbol of guilt and defeat. However, something quite unexpected happened during that sleep.

During his sleep, heavens opened above him and Jacob had a dream that revealed God's presence. *“And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” (Gen 28,12)* God rebuilt the bridge that man had broken with his sin. Jacob was guilt ridden and afraid even to raise his eyes to God. On Him God bestowed His benevolent and healing love. God does not put him on trial; neither accuses nor condemns him, not even reminds him of his sinful past. Overflowing

tenderness of a mother and loving guidance of a father - that is what Jacob experienced in his dream. Until then, he was not aware of God's presence.

He was too frightened and too immersed in himself, in his own guilt feeling to think of God. The picture of God he had kept in his mind was that of a cruel judge, executing severe punishment on the guilty, and his own sense of sin and guilt prevented him from facing God. However, in the quietness of the night, the face of God appeared in his mind, not of a terrible avenger but of a tender loving father, whose love never fails.

God's presence revealed to Jacob through his dream marked an important milestone in the history of salvation. Jesus referred to this dream while speaking about the reconciliation he would effect between heaven and earth, and restore the broken relation between God and the sinful humanity (Jn 1, 51). This dream reminds us that, even when we fall asleep, crushed by the weight of guilt feeling, there is a God who is awake and lovingly watches over us.

The dream gave Jacob a new awareness about God's presence and new revelations about His nature. God has not abandoned him; does not hate him for his sin but accompanies him with compassion even when he is fleeing from that loving presence. It was in the stillness of the night, when his disturbed mind was quiet, that the face of God appeared to him, as the moon reflecting on the still waters of a lake. Jacob did not doubt the vision or question the nature of God who appeared to him in the dream.

Jacob, who went to sleep exhausted, frightened and defeated, woke up as a new person. He felt renewed and strengthened through his awareness that God was present with him. To remember the place where he encountered God, "*he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and*

poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel (Gen 28,18-19). Bethel means House of God. God of Jacob is a God beyond space and time.

The name Bethel is the expression of Jacob's new awareness. Where is Bethel in our lives? It could be any place or situation. It is the place and time where we are awakened to that presence. God is present everywhere, in every situation; He never abandons or rejects us. He keeps watch over us like a mother who watches over her sick baby or like the mother bird hovers over its brood. We might experience God in the most unexpected time and place. When we are pre-occupied with ourselves, with our problems and concerns, we will not be able to experience that gentle presence of God. Here the advice of the psalmist is imperative and enlightening: *"Be still, and know that I am God"*(Ps 46, 10).

42. PENIEL

Gen 32, 30

“So Jacob called the place Peniel, (The face of God) saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip” (Gen 32, 30-31).

That night, at the ford of river Jabbok, Jacob was forced to wrestle with a stranger. Surprising himself, Jacob won in the duel and this marked a turning point in his life. He had always tried to avoid fighting by running away from conflicts. But, with this encounter, he discovered his inner strength which in turn transformed his personality and won him a new name: Israel. Jacob stopped running and started facing difficult situations and conflicts.

Jacob was a coward all his life. It would seem he had strong legs to flee but a weak heart to confront problems. He was shrewd and calculating whereas, his brother Esau was physically strong, but dull. Jacob bought his brother's birthright at a very cheap price and later received the blessing of the father, the prerogative of the first born son by deceit and lies. This made his brother furious and Jacob, having no guts to face him, ran for his life.

On the way, he had a vision that told him that God was with him but that knowledge and awareness did not change his basic character. He continued to be a coward, always running

away from conflicts and making his gains by fraud. He reached Haran and found protection at his uncle's place, but the one who cheated his brother and father was cheated by his uncle, Laban. However, finally he became very successful and rich. He married both the daughters of his uncle, had 12 children and acquired much wealth. Still he was haunted by his fear and could not abandon his crooked ways. He was afraid that his uncle would take away everything from him and so fled with his wives, children and flock. As he approached Canaan, he became afraid of his brother again. Hence he decided to appease his brother by sending him gifts. He sent a message ahead of him: *"I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight"* (Gen 32, 5).

Now Jacob felt trapped. He could neither go to the west nor to the east. He thought Esau who was coming from the west with a band of 400 soldiers would not accept his bribe but destroy him. Terror stricken, he lamented: *"I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all"* (Gen 32, 11). He sent his wives and possessions across the river to the west but stayed alone on the east bank of river Jabbok. However, he could not flee to the east because he had made an agreement with Laban. Only after making an oath that he would leave the country and never come back, did Laban let him go unharmed. They gathered a pile of stones to serve as a monument to this solemn agreement. Now He had no where to go. He stayed alone on the east bank of river Jabbok. As he waited in hope finding an escape route he fell asleep.

Then it happened. Again at night the heavens opened above Jacob. This time God appeared to him not to console and comfort, but to fight: *"Jacob was alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak:"*(Gen 32, 24). God appeared as an

enemy and forced Jacob to wrestle with Him. In the panic he was forced to struggle and then he found in himself a strength that he was not aware of until then. This is what God does with us. All the struggles, suffering, oppositions and difficulties in our lives are sent our way not to destroy us but to strengthen us. No one will be tried beyond one's ability. No one will be given more than one can take. It is not the comfort and consolation that makes us strong but the trials and tribulations of life.

However, the fact remains that it is up to the individual how one uses his/her suffering. Jacob had to fight with the stranger to find his inner strength. If we remain passive and inactive, the suffering would remain just a pain that would weaken and eventually destroy us. But, if we encounter our suffering and deal with them constructively, it will strengthen us. Just as exercise strengthens the muscles, suffering strengthens the mind.

Jacob fought furiously till dawn and won. It might be better to say that God allowed Himself to be defeated, so that Jacob could find his strength. Jacob did not know who his adversary was; still he forced the stranger to bless him. The apparently defeated "enemy" blessed Jacob and gave him a new name, Israel. This name has implications that transcend the limits of a particular race and nation. It is the name that could be applied to all who experience the power within, that was awakened by God. The power does not strengthen the legs to flee but the heart to fight against forces of evil.

Jacob had to fight all night in order to win the battle and recognize the face of God in the stranger. This teaches a very important lesson about prayer. When we pray we have to pray with tenacity and perseverance. Jacob refused to be defeated and did not let the "enemy" go without blessing him. We have to pray until God gives us what we need. We must pray without

giving up. Jesus tells us: *“Ask and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened”* (Lk 11, 9-10). It would mean that one has to keep on asking till one receives; keep on knocking till the doors are opened, as the stories of the persistent neighbor (Lk 11,5-8) and of the importunate widow (Lk 18,1-8) teach.

Jacob gave a name to the place where he wrestled with God, Penuel, which means face of God. It was in the middle of a life-threatening crisis that Jacob experienced God and saw His face. It is mostly when we experience serious problems and difficulties in life that we turn to and call upon God. It is the common experience that we pray more when we are in need. We experience the presence of God more in the midst suffering than in comfort.

As Jacob crossed Penuel the sun rose upon him. He was walking into a bright future with new strength and hope. As we experience God, the dark night of the soul would end and our lives would brighten up. In the fight, Jacob got hurt and could not run any more. No more will he try to flee as he found courage and strength within. This is the end result of God experience. We experience strength and a conviction that we can do everything in Christ.

43. GET UP AND EAT!

1 Kings 19,1-8

“The angel of Yahweh came back a second time and touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat, or the journey will be too long for you.’ So he got up and ate and drank, and strengthened by that food he walked for forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God” (1K 19, 7-8).

Prophet Elijah is the greatest among the prophets. The bible presents him as the prophet par excellence, the symbol and model of prophecy. He was an uncompromising champion of Yahwism, the prophet of fire, confronting kings and challenging people to make an unequivocal decision for or against Yahweh, the God of Israel. On Mount Carmel, he stood alone against the king and almost one thousand prophets and priests of Baal, maintained by the royal court, and proved before the whole people with the evidence of fire coming down from heaven that Yahweh alone is God. It was a moment of triumph for Elijah and the faith he stood for. Yet he was afraid and fled for his life. Finally he was wishing to die!

“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors” (1K 19, 4). It is quite baffling that this happens just after the great triumph on Mount Carmel. How come the mighty stalwart of Yahwism becomes so weak and desperate that he runs away in to the desert and implores his

God to terminate his life? The flight and death wish comes at the end of a long and risky prophetic ministry.

Elijah was called to exercise his ministry in the Northern kingdom, Israel, under the ruthless ruler, Jezebel. She was the pagan queen married to a spineless king of Israel, Ahab. Determined to wipe out even the very name of Yahweh from Israel, Jezebel turned the entire machinery of the government, legislative, judiciary and executive powers, against those who worshipped Yahweh. The slightest resistance was crushed with brutal force. She hunted down and exterminated even those who escaped into the wilderness.

It was after spending more than three years in hiding that Elijah, at the command of his God, Yahweh, decided for a show down on Mount Carmel. In the name of Yahweh, Elijah challenged the 850 prophets and priests of Baal, the deity whom Jezebel patronized and wanted to popularize, for a show of power. In front of the king and the huge crowd gathered on the Mountain, Elijah challenged them to prove if Baal is god by bringing down fire from heaven. Where the servants of the fake god miserably failed, Elijah was vindicated by Yahweh who sent down fire from heaven and consumed the victim on the altar. *“When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.” (1K 18,39).* As the people stood mesmerized Elijah ordered: *“Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.” Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there” (1K 18,40).*

It was a moment of triumph for Yahweh over Baal, but the moment passed very soon. When the queen heard about the massacre she vowed: *“So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow” (1K 19,2).* Now the prophet felt tired and afraid.

He felt it futile and impossible to go ahead against a whole nation, facing the hatred and murderous fury of the throne and the threat of the entire ruling machinery. He fled south, away from the territory of Jezebel, first with a servant and then alone into the desert. Exhausted and disappointed, he did not want to continue. Hence, he laid down and slept with a desire never to wake up again. But, God was not ready to give up on him.

Elijah's mission was not over and so God sent His angel to the sleeping prophet, not once but twice, with bread and water, and with the reassuring word: get up and eat, or the journey will be too long for you. Elijah had a long way to go. He had to reach Horeb and stand before the Lord to receive new and more risky missions.; anoint prophets and kings; confront insolent might of unjust rulers and oppressive regimes; take up the fight against injustice perpetrated by the state against the poor and weak; and give voice to the silent scream of innocent blood shed in the vineyards of greed and luxury. Until all that is accomplished Elijah cannot rest in the sleep of death; he has to carry on his risky, but God given, prophetic work on earth.

The situation of Elijah could be repeated in our lives also. There might come a time in everybody's life when one feels alone, rejected, hated and hunted by all, condemned by fate, with no one to help. When we feel so desolate, it is only natural to desire death. But God is not the God of death but the God of life. He would not abandon His servants in despair but would ask them to get up. He would send his angels in various forms to strengthen us, to make us go forward.

Like Prophet Elijah, we are traveling to the Horeb of God's presence and till we reach the Father's house we are constantly being nourished by the heavenly bread. The food that God gives us today is not the bread baked on hot stones and cold water, but the very body and blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. To every

one who feels tired and falls by the way side of life, Jesus himself becomes the food; His Word sheds light on the path; his body and blood becomes nourishment and His Spirit becomes the strength that abides within and impels us forward.

Therefore get up and eat, you still have a long way to go: to the Horeb in order to stand before God and receive the mission he entrusts. May be to “Samaria”, the centers of political power to bring justice for the people, especially the poor and the weak; to “Jezreel”, in order to answer the cry of innocent blood and establish righteousness. God will be the one who leads; His Word will be the light in the path; the Eucharist will be the source of strength and Spirit will be the moving force.

44. NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE TO GOD

Luke 1, 39

“The angel said to her: the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing is impossible to God” (Lk 1, 35 -38).

Almost every religion of the world testifies to a hope that God would come into this world to liberate humanity from the clutches of sin and evil and to put an end to all suffering. This hope was most prevalent among the people of Israel. Many a prophecy added strength and clarity to this hope. Thus the whole world had been awaiting the coming of a redeemer. Luke the evangelist depicts the fulfillment of these hopes in the form of a vision. An angel was sent to announce the good news to Mary and to seek her consent to cooperate with God for the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Mary who was betrothed to Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth, was surprised to hear that the long awaited prophecy was going to be fulfilled in and through her consent. She was awe struck at the announcement and asked how it could happen as she was a virgin. The question is more of an expression of surprise demanding clarification about her role rather than of unbelief. She did not know what was expected of her. Though

she was well aware of the prophecy about the virgin birth (Is 7, 14), she might have found it difficult to believe that it was through her the prophecy was going to be fulfilled.

“How is it possible?” is a question often repeated in our lives. The enormity of the task at hand might frighten us especially when we do not know how to accomplish it, when our resources are limited and when there are too many obstacles to overcome. The task entrusted could be matters concerning the family, community or nation. One might be confronted with the problem of illness, poverty, natural calamity or death. Whatever be the case, the question is how I can accomplish the task at hand.

This is where we find the relevance for the words of the angel. I cannot, we cannot, but God can do everything. Nothing is impossible for God. In the history of salvation we can see this happening again and again. For example, a virgin gave birth to a child without losing her virginity. Elizabeth the barren old woman became the mother of the forerunner of the Redeemer. Abraham’s wife, Sarah, became mother at the age of 90. There is nothing that is impossible to God who created every thing from nothing.

The obstacle might appear, humanly speaking, insurmountable and the resources totally inadequate for the purpose. The Exodus event provides ample examples. Moses was asked to liberate the people of Israel from the slavery in Egypt. The only weapon he had was a shepherd’s staff. God asked him to drop even that. Then he was sent to the mighty Pharaoh and with that staff God performed wonders.

When the liberated people stood between the sea and the approaching army Moses was asked to stretch out the staff and the waters divided, allowing the people to cross the raging sea as on dry ground.

Joshua was confronted by the enormous fort of Jericho, well fortified and guarded. What God asks him to do is not to lay siege to the city, or attack the walls with battering rams, but just go around the walls carrying the ark and blowing the trumpets. Apparently a stupid and totally inadequate action to take a fortified city, but the walls fell allowing the Israelites to enter. There stood the giant Goliath challenging the entire nation of Israel, and none of the soldiers of Saul dared to take up the challenge; the young shepherd David, with his sling and stones confronted the giant in the Lords' Name. With just one stone Goliath fell; David still had four stones in his bag! Nothing is impossible for God!

It is God's spirit that makes everything possible. Mary believed the Word of God and trusted in His protection. Elizabeth praised Mary for believing the Word of God. In our lives also it is faith and obedience to God's word that remove all the obstacles and make the impossible possible.

Mary gave herself into the hands of God, with the words "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word*". This humble surrender marked the beginning of the realization of salvation for the humanity. The power of God would become manifest in those who dare to believe that there is nothing impossible to God.

45. POWER CAME OUT FROM HIM

Luke 6, 19

“He came down and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them” (Lk 6, 17-19).

The Gospel of Mathew chapters 5 - 7 present Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God in what has come to be called the “Sermon on the Mount”. A parallel sermon can be seen in the gospel of Luke where it is called the “Sermon in the Plane” (6, 17 – 42). After spending the whole night in prayer Jesus selected the twelve apostles. As he came down with the newly instituted college of apostles, a great multitude of people from Judea, Jerusalem, and the far away coast of Tyre and Sidon was waiting for him. They wanted two things from him: the Word of God and healing from their illnesses. All those who came, longed to touch him because power was flowing out from him and healing every one who touched him with faith.

Peter would later tell the audience at the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius that God had anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power (Act 10, 38). At the time of Baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and remained with him as

power. It was with this power of the Spirit that he confronted and defeated Satan in the wilderness; forgave sins; preached the Gospel; healed the sick and cast out demons *“Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country” (Lk 4,14).*

Those who believed in Him confessed their faith. The leper said to Jesus, *“Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean” (Lk 5,12)*, and Jesus healed him saying *“I do choose. Be made clean. Immediately the leprosy left him” (Lk 5,13)*. Even after spending all her wealth for treatments no physician could heal the woman with hemorrhage. She was in a miserable state for twelve years. But when she just touched the fringes of his clothe she was immediately healed *“for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” (Mk 5,28)*. Years of her misery ended suddenly.

That power works even today in and through those who dare to believe. Jesus has promised: *“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Act 1,8)*. In order to receive this power we need only two things: have faith and to pray for it.

No one who approaches with faith will be disappointed. In the Gospels we see many incidents where the ones who believed received what they sought. Jairus prayed and his daughter who was dead got up and walked. Martha and Mary believed in Jesus and they saw the glory of God as their brother who was in the tomb for three days, walked out. When sending out the apostles Jesus has promised: *“These signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues. They will pick up snakes in their hands and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mk 16,17-19)*. Even today the same power will flow from him as healing to

the body, peace to the mind and salvation to the soul provided we touch him with faith and prayer.

At times we might feel too weak even to pray. Situations might have caused us to feel depressed and desperate. We might feel difficult to believe. Still trust in him, pray with the father of the boy with epilepsy who in answer to the comment of Jesus: *“Everything is possible for one who has faith”*. The father cried out *“I have faith. Help my lack of faith!”* (Mk 9, 24). Yes, let us ask the Lord to help our lack of faith and we will see miracles happening in our lives.

46. MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU

2 Corinthians 12, 9

“To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” ((2Cor 12, 7-9).

Paul is the greatest missionary and apostle of Jesus Christ. His encounter with Jesus at the gates of Damascus marked a turning point in his life. Till then he was a zealous Jew, extremely strict in the observance of all the laws and traditions of the fathers. According to his orthodox Jewish perception Jesus Christ was a false prophet, condemned and executed for blasphemy and the Christian faith a heresy that should be eradicated at any cost. Blinded by this conviction he had considered it his God given duty to search out the Christians, bring them before the Jewish court for trial and give them the most severe and exemplary punishment that would deter any Jew from embracing Christianity. In fact he was instrumental in the trial and murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

He was on his way to the distant city of Damascus driven by antichristian zeal to exterminate the nascent Christianity there. It was on this way that the Risen Christ encountered him and turned him into the most zealous missionary of the faith he had vowed to wipe out from the face of the earth. That very moment

Paul, who was then called Saul, accepted Jesus as his only Lord and Redeemer. From then on nothing else had any value for him: *“Yet whatever gains I had these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ”* (Phil 3, 7-8). He was of the firm conviction that *“Christ Jesus has made me his own”* (Phil 3, 12) in such a way that he could say: *“it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”* (Gal 2, 20).

The life of Paul with and for Jesus Christ was extremely rich, filled with special gifts and blessings. He could rightly boast of himself as an apostle second to none: *“Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death”* (2Cor 11, 21-29). He was aware of the many special gifts of the Holy Spirit the Lord had bestowed on him (2Cor 12, 1-6). He possessed greater charismatic gifts than any other; his dedication to Christ was total; his ministry was effective beyond comparison; he was unparalleled in the extraordinary spiritual and mystical experiences. Burned with zeal, he desired to do more than anyone else for Christ. Nothing was going to separate him from Jesus. *“Even if my blood has to be poured as a libation over your sacrifice and the offering of your faith, then I shall be glad and join in your rejoicing”* (Phi 2, 17).

Paul was filled with enthusiasm and ready to suffer and die for Christ. Still something constantly bothered him, like a thorn stuck in the sole of the feet. He could not get away from it and it gave him constant pain *“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to*

torment me, to keep me from being too elated” (2Cor 12, 7). Since Paul does not explain what he meant by this thorn in the flesh, scholars have proposed several hypotheses. Some think it was periodical attacks of malaria that often limited his mobility and effective ministry; for others it was the sporadic seizure of epilepsy, some kind of a physical deformity, impairment of speech, bursts of hot temper, or sexual temptations. All these are purely guesses; we have no way of knowing for certain what that thorn was.

However, the apostle has given us some indication as to the source and purpose of this suffering. He tells us that this suffering was. **1.** Given by God, **2.** It was a messenger of Satan and **3.** It was to keep him humble. From here we can gather some precious lessons about sufferings, persecutions, weaknesses, temptations and even failures and sins. There is a purpose in all these apparently negative elements. It could help us to trust in God, to pray more ardently and to become closer to God. We learn to rely on God rather than our own abilities and gifts. Above all, God’s power is manifested in our weakness. When we feel weak, we would become humble and open to allow God to work in us. Ultimately it is God who works in us and accomplish whatever He wishes. A conviction of this would give us a disposition that allows us to surrender ourselves to the will of God.

One might be surprised to read that God is using Satan or the angel of Satan to torment a great apostle and missionary of Jesus Christ. Here Paul is pointing to a great mystery - the mystery of evil and Satan. In God’s plan of salvation Satan also has a place. The bible does not give us any clear explanation about the origin of Satan, but his role as the tempter, accuser and enemy of humanity is emphasized (Job 1,6-12; Lk 4,1-13; 22,31; 10.18-19). It is neither because Satan is independent

of God and more powerful nor because God cannot destroy him at will, but because God allows him to continue his activities in the world in a limited way. The purpose of this limited activity of Satan that Paul finds in making him rely totally on God and “keep me from being too elated”.

Paul had repeatedly requested God to take away this infirmity, but the only answer he received was: “*My grace is enough for you*”. When we feel our prayers are not being answered, when we feel frustrated over issues of illness, death, failures, evil inclinations, acquired negative habits, humiliating deficiencies, and tend to despair, we need to remember that God is telling us, “*My grace is enough for you*”. In this message we will find peace. We should know and be convinced that God can work through our weakness even more than through our strengths.

47. POWER IN WEAKNESS

2 Corinthians 12, 10

“So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for when ever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12,9-10).

The words of Paul are paradoxical; they might seem unreasonable, exaggeration and outright contradiction to reality. However, if we examine closely we can see that what he is saying is true. God works not through the proud and mighty ones of the world, but through the poor and the weak: *“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (1Cor 1,27-29.* The history of salvation is full of such examples.

Abraham, in his old age was called to abandon his country and kindred, and travel towards a land unknown to him, with a barren wife, to be the father of nations. As the years advanced, Abraham and his wife wondered how God was going to make him the father of nations without even a single child. When finally they were blessed with a child God asked him to offer that only child, the heir of the promise, as a burnt offering. Moses through whom God liberated Israel from the powerful

hand of the Pharaoh was not a hero. In fact, as a coward he had fled from Egypt fearing retaliation for killing an Egyptian. But God strengthened him to accomplish his mission of liberating Israel from slavery. The only weapon he had was a shepherd's staff. Joshua had only the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant and blowing trumpets to bring down the mighty walls of Jericho. David the young shepherd confronting the giant Goliath has only a sling and five stones in the bag.

In Jesus Christ the paradox reaches its climax: a manger as the cradle for the Son of God; a cross as throne for the King of the universe. From birth to death he identified himself with the poor and the powerless of this world. Born as a refugee, hunted by political authorities, earned his bread by the sweat of his brow as a carpenter, wandered having no where to lay his head, and finally condemned and executed as a criminal, he cried out from the cross: *"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"* that is, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mt 27,46). Those who stood beneath the cross challenged him to come down. That is the way of the world. People want a show of power. Similar challenges were hurled at him right from the beginning of his ministry: *"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread, . . . If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down"* (Mt 4,3-6). But God does not respond to such challenges, His ways are totally different.

In the eyes of the world Jesus' life was utter failure. But God made the symbol of humiliation a symbol of salvation and exaltation. Jesus entrusted his life into the hands of the Father who in turn manifested his power by raising the Son from the tomb. Jesus defeated the power of evil and death, by dying and rising. Paul placed his trust in God who can work wonders with his weakness. So he could boast of his weakness. He believed that Christ can work with him better in his weakness.

Not only in the salvation history but also in nature we can see the power of the powerless or the gentle power: drops of water that pierce rocks; blades of grass and soft end of roots that cut through rock. Love may appear weak and fragile, but it is stronger than hate. When a mother sees her child in danger, she would think of nothing else but to jump into the situation to save her child. The powers of evil and destruction are apparently invincible, but the ever lasting and never failing love of God is infinitely more powerful.

Jesus did not choose shrewd philosophers to preach the Gospel or influential politicians and mighty warriors to spread the Kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. He chose some weak and lowly people, fishermen and women, to carry out his mission. Paul the intellectual giant was first thrown down and blinded before He could use him! It is the Spirit of God that works in the hearts of people and effects conversion. God works through the humble and lowly who are open to His Spirit and surrender themselves into His hands. When it was time for the Messiah to be born, God did not choose some royal princess but a simple village maiden who confessed to be the humble servant of the Lord.

This is the way God operates, always. In Him the weak become strong. Hence, no need to be ashamed of one's weakness, no need to go on being depressed with one's inferiority complex. One should be able to say with Paul: *"I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me"* (2Cor 12,9). When we trust in God's power we will see miracles happening in our lives.

48. GREAT FAITH

Mathew 15, 28

“Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish’. And her daughter was healed instantly” (Mt 15, 28).

The episode presented in Mt. 15, 21-26 seems to be diametrically opposed to the normal way of Jesus’ behavior. Jesus was in the area of Tyre and Sidon, in the gentile territory outside Palestine, when a Canaanite woman approached him begging, “Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon”. Jesus ignored her. She knew that the Israelites discriminated against the gentiles. They did not think that the gentiles had any part in the promise God made to Abraham and so they had no right to be in the Promised Land. In short, the Israelites detested the gentiles and used to call them “dogs”.

This gentile woman was desperately in need of his help. She had heard that he was kind, loving and gentle with all, especially with women in need of help. But now she was surprised to find out that he was different with her. At first Jesus ignored her. But, she kept calling out to him! The disciples either felt pity for her or wanted to get rid of her whom they might have considered a nuisance, and so asked Jesus: *“Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us” (Mt. 15,23)*. Surprising even his disciples, Jesus responded, that he was sent only to save the Israelites.

The woman was not ready to take a “no” for an answer. So far she had been following the crowd and calling out from behind. Now she ran ahead and stood right in front of the Master, blocking his way - a kind of road block, and implying thereby I won't let you go without granting my petition. Then it came - the totally unexpected and uncharacteristic reply, as a slap on the cheek of that miserable mother: *“It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs”*.

Jesus was not only unkind but also cruel to the woman. Is this the same Jesus who was considered to be the incarnation of God's compassion? Was he sent only to the lost sheep of Israel? Had he decided to accept the same attitude as the Jews? Why was he so insulting to this woman? If he does not want to help, could he not have been a bit more polite? Why add insult to injury, by calling her dog?

She must have felt humiliated and rejected. One would expect her to curse every one and go away in despair. But not this mother! She was not ready to give up. She was willing to suffer any humiliation for the love of her sick daughter and wanted healing for her at any cost. She believed that Jesus and only Jesus could cure her. She hoped that at the end he might show mercy to her and so refused to give up. Perhaps she noticed a twinkling in the eye of Jesus as he pronounced these apparently harsh words and hung on to that particular word.

The woman took nothing for granted. She knew that she was a gentile, not a part of the chosen race. As such she did not have any claim to the favor of this Jewish rabbi. She did not ask for the food that was reserved for the children of the house. However, she had the capacity to look at the positive side of everything and so did not take being called “dog” as an insult. The word used in the original could mean “Puppy” or a pet dog. She took it as an endearing term rather than an insult. So

she responded, *“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (Mt. 15, 27).*

Upon hearing this, Jesus felt disarmed. Her faith was tested and was found stronger beyond expectation. Then he became his real self again – the kind, merciful and loving Master. He was not only testing her faith but trying to present her as a model to the hypocritical Pharisees and even to the disciples who had little faith. She who was humiliated to the bottom was raised to the pinnacle! *“Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly” (Mt 15,28).*

This could be our experience as well. We might not get our prayers answered immediately. We might even feel that God is far away and does not hear us. Sometimes it could throw us into despair and depression. One could be tempted to question the very existence of God. Here, the example of the Canaanite woman can be an inspiring example for us. She did not stop asking just because she felt ignored or rejected. She did not consider it as her right to be heard by Jesus. Her persistence produced a positive result. If we persist and remain open, in time, we would realize that the answer God gives, positive or negative, will be for our good. Jesus tells us to pray incessantly and persistently like the widow who insisted of getting justice and the poor neighbor who forced the friend to give him bread. Trust in His merciful, everlasting love. Never give up!

49. SUPPORTING HANDS

Psalm 91, 12

*“He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone”
(Ps 91, 11-12)*

Psalm 91 is a psalm that praises God, acknowledging His protection. It would be well and good to learn this psalm by heart and recite every morning as one gets up and every night before going to sleep. God watches over us while we sleep; protects and guides us while we are awake. The psalmist uses many symbols and images to depict God’s care and protection, and one of those images is that of supporting hands of angels. We are traveling through paths that are full of dangers, pit falls and traps, for both body and soul. Unless the Lord protects us we could perish at any moment.

I recall a recent experience of a friend. It was May 4th, the day after his only son’s 17th birthday. He was riding a bike on a country road with his son in the back. The father did not have much experience in driving a Motorcycle; in fact he was a kind of practicing to drive the bike. As he was trying to give way for a truck coming behind to pass, the bike turned over. The son was tossed into the middle of the road while the bike and father fell on the side of the road. Getting up in panic he saw the loaded truck rolling over his son. Terror seized the father who thought it was the end. He ran to his son and helped him to

stand up. Miracle! The boy could stand! A Jeep that came behind the truck rushed the boy to the hospital. The tyre marks were visible on his legs but the boy was not hurt badly. Even the Doctor was amazed at this miraculous escape. They kept him in the hospital for observation and after two days, he was discharged. The father has no words to thank God. Who was it that bore the weight of the truck?

How many such incidents we can recall! Every day we hear of people who escaped from accidents by the 'skin of their teeth'. How many times, we have been saved from possible dangers. Some might interpret it as luck, coincidence or pure chance. To those who believe, nothing happens by chance. If we open the eyes of faith we can see God's protecting hands everywhere.

Moses reminded the people of Israel about the epic journey through the desert: *"In the wilderness you saw how the Lord your God carried you, just as one carries a child, all the way that you traveled until you reached this place"* (Dt.1,31). A close look at our lives would reveal that this is our own experience. God tells us through the great prophet Isaiah, *"As nurslings, you shall be carried in her arms, and fondled in her lap; as a mother comforts her son, so will I comfort you"* (Is 66, 12-13). In the Bible there are many such images that depict the tender love of God.

The concept of guardian angel assures us that God's protection is guaranteed to every one. No one is outside that protection. A baby in the hands of a mother will not stumble, will not fall or get hurt. The psalmist is depicting this truth through the image of the supporting hands of angels. When we are carried by God, we are safe. No harm will fall on us.

However, faith and confidence should not lead one to audacity and presumption. When Satan challenged Jesus to prove His divine son-ship by jumping down from the pinnacle of the

temple, Jesus responded: “*You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test*” (Mt. 4, 7). Jumping from the tower was not for God’s glory, but for one’s own vanity. God does not guarantee any protection for such presumptuous acts. We have to distinguish between trust in God and presumption that comes from pride. We must trust in the Lord and try to live according to His commandments. His hands will protect us.

50. GUIDE AND COMPANION

Tobit 5

“Then Tobit called his son and said to him, ‘Son, prepare supplies for the journey and set out with your brother. May God in heaven bring you safely there and return you in good health to me; and may his angel, my son, accompany you both for your safety’ (Tob 5, 17).

The blind old man Tobit was in a great dilemma. He was a devout Israelite, who faithfully observed all the laws and regulations of his religion. Even when he was in exile, away from the Promised Land, he did not deviate from this path of fidelity. But that obedience itself seemed to have been the main cause of his misfortune. He used to bury the bodies of the dead, which was an act of piety and devotion. But he had to go into hiding fearing the wrath of the king because the bodies he buried were those of persons executed and left exposed by royal orders. After many years he was pardoned and could return home, but then he went again to bury the body of an Israelite exposed in the public square. Touching the dead body made him ritually unclean and in obedience to the law, he slept outside which caused the sparrow's droppings to fall in his eyes making him totally blind. Why all these disasters for such a devout man? Is this the way the Lord rewards fidelity to His law, one could ask. But this is not the whole story.

In his old age and misery, Tobit prayed ardently and then he remembered that he had deposited some money with a friend

in the far away town of Rages. Now his prayer was for a suitable companion to go with his young son, Tobias, to collect that money. Tobit did not realize that the expert travel guide whom Tobias found in town was the Archangel Raphael whom God had sent in answer to his prayers. Raphael was sent in order to help not only the old man Tobit but also the young and unhappy woman Sarah who had lost seven husbands one after the other; each killed by a demon the first night of their wedding, and was praying with bitter tears.

The Hebrew word "*Raphael*" means "*God heals*". This Raphael guided, protected and made the journey of Tobias far more successful than they could even dream. Sarah was healed from the demonic possession and she found a suitable husband in Tobias. While Tobias was celebrating the marriage, Raphael collected the money from Rages. With the medicine Raphael suggested, Tobit regained his sight. All these happened because God guided their path.

The book of Tobit plays a major role in the Church's teaching about Guardian angels. God sees our good works, hears our prayers, knows our needs, guides our paths and protects us always. In fact this is what the teaching about the guardian angels tells us. Tobit consoled his worried wife saying: "*A good angel will accompany him; his journey will be successful, and he will come back in good health*" (*Tob 5,21*). Though at that time the old Tobit did not know that an archangel was accompanying their son, nevertheless he was confessing his faith that God would protect the lad.

We experience God's guidance in various ways. "*When you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, this is the way, walk in it*" (*Is 30, 21*). We hear the gentle voice of God deep in our hearts showing the right path and warning about dangers. This voice is nothing

less than the helper and guide Jesus had promised to send (Jn. 14, 16). Jesus has also assured us that he Himself will be with us till the end of time (Mt 28, 20). Two ways are set before us, way of life and way of death (Ps 1; Dt 30,15-20). The Spirit that dwells in us tells us to choose the way of life. The inner voice and guidance is interpreted as the guardian angel. The Word of God is the surest guardian that shows us the right path at every turn of our lives.

We must listen to the inner voice, choose the right path... Jesus has given us the warning: *“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it (Mt 7,13-14).* May the good Lord give us the wisdom to choose the way that leads to life and the strength to walk along that way to the end! May the good angel who guided the young Tobias guide us till we reach our Father’s Home!

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