

## Holy Week Messages – St. Mark's Cathedral, Bangalore, 2004



### *The Cross in the New Testament*

#### **Introduction**

The Cross of Christ has far reaching implications for human history, culture and all of creation. On this Good Friday let our minds travel back two thousand years in time to witness the events of that very first Good Friday.

Let us attempt to recapture those three hours of our Lord's suffering on the Cross and reflect on the significance of the event for all of creation and its place in God's purpose. In spite of the many fine sentiments that have been expressed about the Cross in our hymns, in the compositions of great composers like Handel, in great works of art, in the many books that get written and in the many sermons that are preached...; we must also admit that in daily life the cross is commonly used in a way that flouts its original significance. Most commonly, it is used as a symbol of a religious identity promoting an exclusivist consciousness. Church leaders use it as a sign that endorses their power and authority. In history, the cross was an instrument of torture, and a means of causing shame. It had no connotations of power associated with it. But shockingly, the cross is even used as a war symbol making Christ a war god to protect warmongering modern imperialists. American soldiers, as they left on their 'mission' against Iraq, were signed with the sign of the cross on their foreheads.

A few years ago there was a by-election in a constituency that is predominantly Christian in Tamil Nadu. The election came about two months after the promulgation of a law against religious conversions. Even as there were protests and demonstrations against the law, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu negotiated a deal with the Bishop of the

Diocese and twenty pastors in that constituency. She was able to buy Christian votes without in the least relenting over the law and the Chief Minister's candidate won the election. The CM expressed her gratitude in a public ceremony and gifted the pastors with a gold cross. The pastors in the presence of the Bishop brazenly accepted the gift. So the Cross has even become a symbol of bribery.

Now I do not want to be cynical. These are but extreme and glaring examples of gross abuse. But none of us is exempt from either using or accepting the use of the Cross in a demeaning and unbiblical manner. If you and I looked deeply into our lives we too can identify the number of ways in which we have indulged in the abuse of the symbol of the Cross. What has gone wrong? The meditations and sentiments remain intact but side by side gross abuse of the symbol of the Cross also exists.

Can we find a way out? Let us meditate together on what the cross meant to the writers of the New Testament and pray that we learn the true meaning of the cross for today. In addition to strengthening the hope of personal salvation for believers, I hope that these four meditations, inasmuch as they attempt to show the present day relevance of what happened two thousand years ago, may help to also expand our understanding of the significance of the cross for our culture, society and world. Once we understand the meaning of the cross to contemporary life, we shall automatically become reticent about using the Cross as a symbol in wrong and demeaning ways. It is towards this that we seek to grasp the comprehensive ways of looking at the Cross in the New Testament. Let us now turn towards the task. The New Testament writings can broadly be seen to be composed of two different types of writing. The first comprises the Gospels and Acts and is called narrative.

The second form is the epistolary form that includes all of Paul's writings and is basically made up of letters. In the epistolary part of the New Testament, the Apostle Paul is the major contributor besides the Letter to the Hebrews and the so called Catholic Epistles. The Book of Revelation is unique in that it is a whole volume of apocalyptic, i.e. revelation of secret and mysterious ways of God made known to people who are undergoing severe and unrelenting oppression with a lot of allusion to the on going imperial politics which was tyrannical. The other writers of

letters mostly follow the Pauline line of thinking. The Letter to the Hebrews also follows one line of Paul's thinking derived from the common background of Jewish sacrifices. We shall therefore, first of all attempt to trace the development of thought in Paul and then also look at the Book of Revelation. We shall then turn to the Gospels which were written after the letters of Paul.

Except for the book of Revelation, all the books of the New Testament, particularly those attributed to the Apostle Paul, were written before the canonical Gospels. One of my specific goals in this study is to enable us to regain what has been lost through the practice of reading the Gospels as providing narrative support for what is found in the epistles. For in many ways the Gospel writers' different approaches to portraying the event of the Cross through their narratives seem to be done with a view to complement and maybe also to offer a corrective here and there to the perceptions that had taken roots in the early Christian communities. However, in the Church today, we try to read the Gospels in the light of the reflections found in the epistles and so miss seeing the complementary and corrective portrayals of the Gospels.

### ***1 The Apostle Paul's Perception***

Next in significance to the Christ event is the event of the conversion of St. Paul and the great missionary breakthrough achieved during his ministry. In addition to being a great missionary Paul was an exponent of the Gospel as well. Paul's learning at the feet of a great Jewish teacher Rabban Gamaliel, his upbringing outside of Palestine in the Graeco-Roman milieu and his own understanding that it is not the rigour of religious fastidiousness but the grace of God that enables one to become acceptable and useful to God, all of it cumulatively made him a great thinker. He did not write any systematic treatise trying to explain the Gospel but his thinking emerged in specific contextual situations and it is preserved for us in the epistles he was prompted to write because of various problems that arose in the churches he had founded.

These scattered and random thoughts when set in their original story background are often very profound in meaning and can speak very powerfully to contemporary

situations. However, the first casualty during the doctrinal development in the history of the Church, was the ignoring of the stories that gave rise to the Pauline insights. The concepts were isolated from their moorings and sweeping generalisations were accepted as his teaching. Secondly, excessive and exclusive emphasis was laid on the personal experience and that too with a futuristic reference. The socio-political and cultural implications were neglected. Much worse, the Gospels which were written with a "Back to Jesus and his teaching" call were read with the eyes of a much misunderstood Paul to great detriment.

As far as possible we shall try to recover the original story settings of some of his teachings on the Cross of Christ and see the thoughts that emerge to apply it to our own times and also see how Paul's thinking underwent a development taking note of which will also help us in our understanding. The most important and the well-known perception of the Cross of Christ is that God justifies humankind through grace. Paul most surely knew the story of the Cross. Therefore, his musings on justification by faith (Romans 1:16&17; 3:21-25; 4:16-25; 5:1-5; 6:20-23; 8:1-4; I Corinthians 1:18-25; 15:15-19 et al) should be understood only in the light of the story of the Cross. His interpretation of the Cross is that we need to be able to see that the death of Jesus on the Cross not just the most tragic event in human history showing the extent to which powers of evil will go to eliminate any moral challenge. Because, wonder of wonders, God was able to turn this worst evil act into an ironic comedy.

God chose to forgive all of humankind who were in fact represented in the run up to the Cross that day. There were the leaders of religion, the political authority who together planned and executed the killing, there were also all the other members of the public - some of them shouting, "Crucify him", some of them running away, yet others paralysed into inaction because of fear and powerlessness and so all of them acquiescing one way or the other in the killing of the Son of God. An unspeakable act of cruelty and injustice became for ever a salvation event in which God was present, working out a way for the whole of humankind to be saved from their orientation towards evil and from consequent death and damnation. Those of us who by the grace of God come to believe in this wondrous act of God are brought into a new relationship with God. We who were

unacceptable to God because of our sinfulness, we who had chosen to become God's enemies and friends of the devil, God accepts all of us.

Some of us may object saying we have never been God's enemies. We live a decent life and we are not conscious of an evil disposition. We have always been pious and religious people. That is precisely the human predicament. We are religious and pious for our own security and well-being. We are decent but we seldom realize that in the name of religion and acceptable social norms we legitimise injustice and exploitation. We are rarely, if ever, true friends of God out of love for God's own sake. We may indulge in many acts of charity but we seldom desire and seek justice. Therefore, our religion is a mask and a cover for our alienation from God.

But God is gracious. When we realize that not just in the acts of moral failings but in our very attempt to be good religious people, loyal citizens of the state and good advocates of culture and tradition... it is then that we fail the God of Love and Justice most, it is then that God forgives and accepts us and gives us a new start. This is what is called justification by faith. (See Romans 5:6-11 in which Paul describes the predicament of even decent pious people as enemies of God for he was a fervently religious man and rigorous in maintaining a life of strict discipline). Once justified God confers upon us the status of being children of God. This is what is referred to as the experience of receiving the Spirit of God who enables us to call God endearingly as Abba Father in the same intimate way Jesus had addressed God. (Romans 8: 14-17).

God has destined us to become like the Son of God himself revealed in and through the human life of Jesus of Nazareth. And because of all this present and ongoing transformation, death will lose its grip over us and hell will be abolished. Paul had been a very religious Jew. He was a strict moralist. He came to realize, however, that it was his religious fervour that had led him to persecute the Church (Philippians 3:1-11 & I Timothy 1:12-17). His strict morals had not helped him to become a friend of the sinners. He understood why the Jewish religious leaders had been misled. The words of the risen Lord who met him on the road to Damascus and said to him that it was hard for him to kick against the goads and helped him towards his

conversion made him realize that if God could love and accept him, God would accept everyone. He underwent a thorough conversion which, made him affirm that he was now crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20&21 i.e. his religiosity and his moral pride had been put to death) and he was living a radically transformed life. He realized afresh that he did know that to do the good that he wanted to was not in him. Because he had now come to understand the sort of good that God expected from us all. Not simply the good that had been taught by the rigorous religious culture. He also knew the pull towards the very thing he should not do, i.e. not necessarily moral evil but the things unacceptable to God but nevertheless acceptable to the world. He despaired that no matter how much he tried the things of tradition and culture hung on to his back like a stinking dead body that is tied to the back of criminals from which they cannot free themselves (Romans 7: 21-25).

But, thanks be to God, he had now learned to glory only in the Cross of Christ the power of God unto salvation. Understanding Paul's grasp of the meaning of the Cross from his own experience delivers us from trivialising justification by faith as merely an acceptance of a doctrine. The far-reaching implications of living a life justified by God and marching towards salvation (i.e. being made in the image of Christ) day to day living for God are seldom realized by us, present day Christians. When Paul said that we are justified when we become believers and that we shall be saved by confessing with our lips that Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9-11) we think he was referring to a doctrinal assent to the doctrine of justification and that a formal creedal confession is all that is required to be saved from damnation. But what Paul really meant was that justification required a turning away from ritualised religion. Such a religion tried to please God through sacrifices and was looking to God to bring about a future deliverance. It had no qualms about putting up with the claims of Caesar as son of God and lord (this was the title used by the Roman emperor in those days). Therefore, confessing Jesus as Lord implied that such a confession also implied a refusal to call Caesar, "Lord". For Paul, salvation was the end goal. This would become reality only by openly by confessing Jesus as Lord. (Romans 10:9-11). For only such a confession showed that one who had turned towards God could no longer acquiesce in the claim of Caesar to be son of God and lord. Such a challenge to that claim of Caesar automatically

invoked the death penalty.

It is for this kind of experience of being put right with God and becoming willing to die without compromising our loyalty to the crucified Christ, the Cross as understood by Paul, calls us. As Paul grew in maturity he was led into other visions of the Cross too. Letters to the Colossians and Ephesians were written towards the end of his ministry as he was waiting for the emperor's verdict on whether or not he was guilty of capital punishment. Writing to Colossians he makes two shocking statements. First of all he talks about his own sufferings as being that which completes what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ on the Cross. (Colossians 1: 24 and Ephesians 2:13-18). This is astonishing because we are used to thinking that Christ's work on the Cross is an all sufficient and perfect work. No human being can dare to supplement or augment it. Paul did not see it that way. He understands God as one who incorporates unjust and undeserved human suffering into the sufferings of Christ and imputes to all such suffering a salvific significance. As we shall see later in our discussions on the Gospel portrayals this understanding very much reflects Jesus' own thinking.

The second startling insight Paul is led to in the same letter is that the Cross of Christ itself proved as a means of judging the very powers who thought they had indeed triumphed over Christ. They also thought that he had put him to terrible shame because it was the Roman practice to crucify convicts naked. Paintings of the Cross out of deference to the Lord's honour depict him as crucified with a loin cloth. In reality they did not care to spare his sense of dignity. Reflecting on this Paul says that it was in fact the Roman authority and the religious leadership who really were hung up on the Cross naked and the Son of God in fact triumphed over them. Colossians 2:13-15).

The empire of Rome was falsely being proclaimed as a reign of peace. In fact they had ruthlessly stamped out many a rebellion. However, some historians refer to it approvingly as PAX ROMANA (The Peace of Rome). The Jewish religion is one that promoted the ethnic consciousness of the people and made them very exclusive. These two institutions joined together in doing away with Jesus because his announcement of the coming Kingdom

of God threatened the imperial security of Rome (Luke 23:1-3) although he had never advocated an armed rebellion to establish God's righteous reign. His prophetic action to call people back to a real understanding of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27&28), his proclamation that the Temple was a House of Prayer for all nations (Mark 11:12-19), along with many other challenges to the tradition of the Elders (Mark 7:1-23; Matthew 23:13-26) had threatened the popularity and power of the leaders of Jewish religion. So they embarked upon a joint conspiracy to do away with Jesus. Their real ugliness and ruthlessness came to light when the crucified Jesus was proclaimed the Son of God and Lord throughout the empire.

The Jews started persecuting the Christians. Stephen was stoned to death. Apostles Peter and John were asked not to preach Christ. Paul was authorized to arrest and harass Christians everywhere. (See this from Ch.7 onwards of Acts). Their proclamation of Jesus as Lord was seen as a rival claim to the claim of Caesar (Acts 17:6-8 & I Corinthians 12:1-3). In all probability sporadically here and there Roman officials intimidated some Christians to deny the lordship of Christ and compelled them to acknowledge the sovereignty of Caesar. This became widespread throughout the empire from the reign of Domitian onwards for another 180 years. But sporadic state persecutions must have begun even during the time of Paul and so Paul says that the plight of some Christians was that they were being relentlessly killed for the sake of Christ. (See Romans 8:31-38).

So Paul comes to the conclusion that it was not Jesus who suffered shame and died, it was the powers who suffered shame because they were seen in all nakedness for what they really were. (Colossians 2:13-15). Today once again we see a coming together of religious fanaticism and political powers to kill all norms of justice here in India, in the United States and in many other parts of the world. Their power and confidence are rising. More and more people are tempted to join them to safeguard their own vested interests. What is our assessment and how should we respond? In the Letter to the Ephesians Paul comes to yet another rather incongruous understanding of the Cross of Christ. He interprets the Cross as breaking down the middle wall of partition that separated the Jew from the non Jewish nations (Ephesians 2:11-18). The Cross had proved a

means of bringing peace between the two divided ethnic groups divided on the grounds of religion, culture and the political reality of the rulers and the ruled. Christ thus became the Prince of Peace by killing enmity in and through his broken body on the Cross. For the first time in ages, Jewish people who had accepted the Gospel and non Jewish believers started sitting down for common meal fellowships. This was an astounding new phenomenon. Non Jewish believers were not compelled to accept the purity pollution laws of the Law of Moses. Without any such condition, believers from the two groups who earlier were distant from each other because of the great cultural divide and because of Jewish animosity against the Gentiles as imperial masters were now saying that they had become one body in Christ. A new human community of peace had come into being signposting that such a reality was going to envelope the whole of humankind.

From this reality Paul takes a fresh look at the story of the Cross. How did it come about? It came about by the joint work of the Jewish leaders joining hands with the hated Gentile rulers. This for Paul in a strange way signaled that through the Cross the wall of partition was broken and a way was paved for the long awaited Jew-Gentile unity. The new humanity was born not just at the mission churches. In fact, what happened in mission experience was made possible because Jews and Gentiles had come together to break bread together as those belonging to the body of Christ! It is an undeniable fact that something wonderful had happened as a result of the Cross of Christ. Humankind is forgiven and accepted by God. Reconciliation between two communities who despised each other had been achieved. The perpetrators of the atrocity of the Cross, deemed powerful had been put to shame. God who began all this good work at the Cross will consummate all things in Christ. And all this became possible because of the Cross.

## ***II The Understanding of the Book of Revelation***

Paul's understanding of the Cross and the consequent hope for consummation of all things ended with a note of optimism. Systematic persecution had not yet broken out, though from time to time, Gentile Christians particularly had had to pay with their lives. However, the situation changed and from the time of the emperor Domitian, systematic state persecution affected the Church severely. The special

protection enjoyed by some of the Apostles was no longer available to the Church. The eagerly awaited return of Christ seemed to be receding further and further away. But the Church remained faithful and they were given a new understanding about the Cross. They began to see that even as they were suffering, Christ who was in heaven was a lamb who remained as though slain (Revl. 5:6-8 & 13:8).

This slain form is not just to assure Christians that the Son of God was sharing in their suffering. For they understood that the Lamb was as though slain from the foundation of the world. The coming into the world of the Son of God and getting killed on the Cross were after all one visible act of what has been going on all the time. From the very foundation of the world when God gave humankind freedom and resolutely respected it even when it was grossly abused, God had to take upon God's own self all the pain inflicted by the abuse of freedom. What happened to Jesus in history was but a one time revelation of what is for ever going on in terms of God being fellow sufferer and enabler of those hurt by human abuse of God given freedom and stewardship. The Christ event helped crystallize all the unjust suffering of human history. It gathered a tremendous momentum by incorporating all the hurts suffered in human history and thereby has begun to break the powerful nexus of evil. The beast will be bound up and thrown into the abyss for ever. Such is the hope and new understanding given to the Church of the Book of Revelation (Revelations 12:7-11).

The hope expressed in the book is that the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world has been given the power to break open the seal of the book containing the mysterious plan of God and to set it in motion. The power of evil will be broken by the faithfulness and steadfastness of the believers who are persecuted for their belief. The Lamb and his bride, the suffering community, will rule, there will be a new creation and God will no longer need a Temple to dwell in. God will dwell among people (Revelations 21:1-7 & verse 22-26). What Paul and the Book of Revelation teach us is that the Cross should not be viewed simply as a one time event. It is to be understood as a contemporary and ongoing event always inspiring faith and hope no matter what amount of suffering and disappointment we are to put up with.

The Cross of Christ enables us to see God's simultaneous involvement and the way God achieves God's purposes through irony and paradox. God does not act like Superman or Tarzan intervening through dramatic manifestations of power. The God of the universe is a self-giving, self-effacing God whose love goes on forgiving and empowering so that the powerless victims themselves will be the real doers and what they do will reflect God's own self-giving nature. This is the story of the Cross told in diverse ways in the New Testament.

### ***III Portrayals of the Cross in the Gospels***

Why did the Gospel writers portray the cross in the way they did? The Gospels were written, no doubt, primarily to preserve the memory of Jesus, his life and ministry of teaching and deliver those in the grips of the devil and to retell the story of his Cross and Resurrection. But there was yet another purpose which is not openly articulated. And that was to bring a corrective to the distorted understanding of the Pauline teaching on justification. As in the days of the sale of indulgences ( i.e. the Church issued certificates absolving sins for payment of money in the middle ages prior to Luther's challenge to such practices) just prior to the time of the Reformation, the doctrine had been misunderstood as offering acceptance by God without any real repentance and without any commitment towards an on going life of obedience. We have an indication of that in the letter by James (i.e. James who was a contemporary of Paul foresaw the danger of God's free offer of forgiveness becoming an occasion for abuse). The Gospels, by and large also seem not too happy with understanding the death of Christ in terms of a sin offering only.

All the four Gospels, while they indicate that the Cross provided the occasion for God to forgive and accept wayward humanity, also seem to take special precaution to portray the Cross without giving the idea that it was a sin offering to appease the wrath of God. Of course, for all four of them the Cross was the means of redemption. But about exactly how God was in Christ turning an act of human arrogance into a wonderful source of redemption there is a conscious divergence away from the partially understood teaching of Paul.

Only by taking each of these portrayals in their own terms

can we understand the depth of the challenge they bring as well as the great Good News they proclaim. That each of them differ in their portrayal and bring out different aspects of the meaning present in the event of the Cross need not be laboured upon. The mere fact that the first two Gospels only record for us the so called cry of dereliction, that the three sayings found in Luke are not found in any other Gospel and that the three other words are found only in the Fourth Gospel is sufficient evidence of the intentionally different portrayals.

We know that the first three Gospels show a literary relationship to each other. We can also establish that the fourth Gospel knew at least one of the first three well. So we now need to find out what special insight each of the Gospel writers wanted us to comprehend.

The Gospels of Matthew and of Mark lay stress on Jesus' solidarity with the Galilean masses, both of them only record the saying of Jesus interpreting his death as a ransom paid for by the Son of Man and both of them only record the saying, which is usually designated the fourth word from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" So we shall first of all try to grasp the significance of the Cross for Matthew and Mark.

The emphasis of Luke is on the forgiving love of God. John's emphasis is on how the 'Lifted up Son of Man' accomplishes and finishes the task of bringing to judgment to the ruler of the world, the devil and have him exorcised to free the world from his grip. Let us study each of the three portrayals.

### ***A. The Cross in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark***

Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man. Many of us ordinary readers of the Gospels take it as the Son of God deliberately calling attention to his humanity. Scholars, of course, have written volumes on this self designation of Jesus. It is safe to say that there is a great deal of confusion over this issue. Yet keen bible students with the help of a concordance and a bible dictionary can easily get at the meaning. It does very many times refer to the frailty of human nature in comparison to the divine as in Ps 8 and repeatedly in the Book of Ezekiel. i.e. Son of Man is a reference to the frail human nature small in size and very

temporal in life expectancy compared to God who is eternal and unimaginably great. But in the book of Daniel, "Son of Man" bears a special meaning.

From the way our Lord talked about the Son of Man coming in the clouds and being seated at the right hand of God it is clear he had the Daniel's vision in the seventh chapter of the Book of Daniel in his mind when he referred to himself as the Son of Man. The "Son of Man" in Daniel represents people who underwent severe persecution under the Greek tyrant Antiochus, but who nevertheless relentlessly fought against him to preserve their religious integrity. They resisted Antiochus' attempt to corrupt and defile their religion by offering pigs as sacrifice, by bringing idols into the Temple... The vision assured the people that they would be vindicated and would be crowned with honour and dominion. Therefore when Jesus assumes the title "Son of Man", recalling the vision of Daniel, he was trying to convey that he was the representative of all people who were oppressed by culture, religion and a ruthless state.

Once we understand this then the meaning of Jesus' self designation as the Son of Man becomes self-evident, i.e. he had come to include into himself all suffering and struggling people. The people with whom he chose to associate and the people for whom he cared most show this clearly. Jesus associated himself with the "Lost sheep of the house of Israel" by choosing to operate from despised Galilee, by choosing all his disciples from among the Galileans, by allowing himself to be looked after and cared for by a few dedicated women of Galilee, by touching and embracing those deemed untouchable - leprosy stricken people, by challenging the abuse of the institution of the Sabbath saying that it was meant primarily for people, i.e. for those who labour and are heavy laden, by rebuking the pious rich for their callousness in plundering the homes of the widows and neglecting the needs of the poor... In this way Jesus showed that it was such people who were the lost sheep of the house of Israel, the incorporated community of the Son of Man.

### ***The Ransom Paid by the Son of Man***

Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man. Most of us understand it to mean that the Son of God was deliberately calling attention to his humanity. Scholars, of course, have

written volumes on this self designation of Jesus. It is safe to say that there is a great deal of confusion over this issue. Yet keen bible students with the help of a concordance and a bible dictionary can easily get at Jesus' real meaning. It does very many times refer to the frailty of human nature as opposed to the divine, as in Ps 8 and repeatedly in the Book of Ezekiel. However, in the book of Daniel, "Son of Man" has a particular meaning. And from the way Jesus spoke about the Son of Man appearing in the clouds and being seated at the right hand of God, it is clear he was referring to Daniel's vision in the seventh chapter of the Book of Daniel whenever he referred to himself as the 'Son of Man'. In the book of Daniel, the 'Son of Man' referred to people who were severely persecuted by the Greek tyrant Antiochus but who nevertheless relentlessly fought against him to preserve their religious integrity. They resisted Antiochus' attempt to corrupt and defile their religion by offering pigs as sacrifice and by bringing idols into the Temple... The vision assured them that they would be vindicated and crowned with honour and dominion.

Once we understand this, then the meaning of Jesus' self designation as the Son of Man becomes evident i.e. he had come to include into himself all suffering and struggling people. We see this very clearly when we take note of the people he chose to associate with and the people he cared most about. Jesus associated himself with the "Lost sheep of the house of Israel" by choosing to operate from despised Galilee.

Galilee was the abode of two tribes deemed cursed already by Moses according to Deut 27:13. This prejudice was further strengthened as according to the southerners, i.e. the more orthodox Jews the Galileans had compromised their culture by hobnobbing with Gentile traders who used Galilee as a resting place in their crossings of the desert region between Assyria and Egypt. Jesus did not only choose to make Galilee his mission headquarters he also chose all his disciples from among the Galileans. He allowed himself to be looked after and cared for by a few dedicated women of Galilee. He touched and embraced those deemed untouchable like those stricken by leprosy.

Religiously he challenged the abuse of the institution of the Sabbath saying that it was meant primarily for people, i.e. "for those who labour and are heavy laden". He openly

rebuked the rich and pious who were callous about neglecting the needs of the poor and plundered the homes of widows (Luke 6:24; 16:19-24; Mark 12:38-40). In this way Jesus showed that it was such people who were the lost sheep of the house of Israel, the incorporated community of the Son of Man.

Therefore, Jesus' words that he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many should not be interpreted simply as a sacrifice to be made to atone for the sins of the world. For to whom was the ransom being paid? Is God the father a ransom demanding blackmailer? Most certainly not. Paying off the ransom, if understood as that which is being paid on behalf of suffering humanity then is being paid to the exploiters and oppressors. God seems to be saying, "Have you not had enough through all the exploitation and oppression down the ages? All right, take the life of my Son who is in solidarity with those on whom you have been inflicting pain. Realize now at least that what you took for granted as your privilege, and often as a God given privilege at that, has in fact caused deep pain not just to the people whom you have been hurtful to but to me, whom you call your God." This is by no means far fetched. Nor is it an imposed reading the text will not bear. For it is this meaning which is climatically reinforced by the cry of despair, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

For those of you who know your bibles these words will echo the very first verse of Ps 22. Traditionally it was thought that Ps 22 was written by the psalmist as a prophecy of the coming sufferings of Christ. I wish to emphasise here that that cannot be true. Psalm 22 belongs to the category of 'Lament Psalms'. There are many such psalms in the Book of Psalms. Most of them follow a particular form. They begin with a lament very much like the cry of despair. They express hopelessness that God seems not to care for them in spite of the terrible things they suffer. But the mood shifts to one of affirmation of faith and even to thanksgiving as if their prayers had been answered. See for example, Ps 22:25 onwards "From thee comes my praise in the great congregation... The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied... All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord..." Jesus as the son of Man, who is together with the collective of all such faithful sufferers now leans on the experience of a saint of the past and expresses his faith and not just his sense of despair.

Paradoxically, it is the chief executioner Centurion who understands who Jesus was. He had obediently executed Pilate's order to crucify Jesus. Perhaps he too had joined in, in the mocking by other soldiers and the leaders of religion. It was under his direction that the caption Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews - 'INRI', was written on a placard and placed over the head of the Crucified Lord. But suddenly, soon after Jesus died, letting out the cry of despair, the Centurion makes an astounding affirmation, saying "Truly this man was a son of God". This was not just an affirmation of the divinity of Christ. Rather, it was a radical political confession. Roman Emperors, one of whom the Centurion served were designated the 'son of God and lord'. This was inscribed on all Roman coins. And the Centurion was directly challenging this. He had come to understand the real meaning of being the son of God. Roman emperors traditionally ruled with an iron fist. They were ruthless and merciless - supposedly for the sake of maintaining law and order. They indulged in lives of comfort and luxury. They made slaves fight wild beasts for entertainment. They exploited and abused women at will. Yet they demanded to be praised as benevolent rulers! The Centurion who had thus far acquiesced in all this now came to understand that to be a king was to be in solidarity with the people who suffer most. It was to effect such a repentance that Jesus paid the ransom standing alongside of the collective of the oppressed.

The Centurion who recognized in Jesus true divine kingship, in all probability, was beheaded for that confession. Because by calling Jesus Son of God he was renouncing his loyalty to Caesar. It is possible that his confession was recorded only because he paid such an extreme price. For there were no witnesses to that event from among the followers of Jesus. This Centurion for ever remains our representative at the foot of the Cross. Whether he represents us in his capacity as a faithful soldier of the empire acquiescing in its brutality, in its power and hierarchical structures or in his converted phase as one who had come to recognize in the powerless Jesus the nature of true and divine kingship is left to us to choose.

Both Matthew and Mark call on us to make that decision.

### ***B. The Portrayal of the Cross of Christ by Luke***

Paul endearingly referred to Luke as the 'beloved physician'. He had accompanied Paul on some of his mission journeys. In Luke's own testimony he has narrated the pains he took to research into traditions about Jesus and he recorded what he believed to be an accurate account of the life and ministry of Jesus. He had his own special emphases to communicate, nevertheless.

Let us begin by taking note of some of the important emphases that Luke placed on the understanding of the Cross of Christ. Chief among them were his emphasis on peace, repentance and forgiveness. Alongside of these open emphases we also find a subtle political undercurrent drawing our attention to the politics of violence and non-violence.

### ***1. Luke's Emphasis on Peace and its relationship with the Cross of Christ***

Luke's Gospel shows the relationship between Peace and the Salvation brought through the Cross of Christ. Peace as Luke would have us understand it has many shades of meaning. It is not simply peace of mind or absence of conflict. Peace is that well-being which is conferred upon humankind as a gift from God. It is a power which protects, provides for, sustains relationships and above all gives an assurance of God's abiding presence. Peace is experienced in small measures - when people are delivered from illness, when God's people experience his deliverance and so on. But real peace is experienced in full measure only when the assurance of forgiveness and becoming acceptable to God becomes a permanent reality. The gift of peace has a dynamic quality. It can be conferred and it can be withdrawn.

Through the Cross of Christ God made his peace available for all people until the final consummation of all things in Christ. All this is communicated as he narrates the story of Jesus and his death and resurrection. Let us see how this unfolds. The final words of the Benedictus i.e. the song of Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79) talk about God guiding our feet in the way of peace. The song hopes for many things to come about through Jesus. They are - *salvation* through the house of David his servant, (i.e. the hope of the Messianic age was looked forward to eagerly by the people of Israel);

*deliverance* from the hands of enemies and from all who hate the people of God (an unmistakable allusion to freedom from Rome); *to be able to serve God without fear*; the knowledge of salvation through *forgiveness of sins*; deliverance to the people of Galilee for it is they who are referred to as sitting in darkness and under the shadow of death (Is 9:1&2). All these hopes together are compounded in the final verse, in the hope that Christ who is the daystar from on high will visit us and guide our feet in the way of Peace. It is this peace that is announced by the angelic host as "Peace on earth and Good will towards people on earth" to the shepherds in the field at the birth of Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem.

We should not fail to notice that Luke was indicating that the gift of Peace was not going to be for Israel alone as expressed in the song of Zechariah but for the whole of humankind. Then in the song of Simeon once again the nature of peace linked to God's salvation for both Jews and Gentiles is hinted at. The Cross is alluded to in Simeon's word to the mother of Jesus when the parents of Jesus bring him as an infant to be dedicated to God and Simeon who is at the Temple recognizes in that infant God's channel of salvation but it would be through a violent death he would have to face. Metaphorically he said that a sword will pierce through the mother's heart and that many in Israel will fall and rise. The 'fall' most probably referred to the difficulty many Jewish people had in accepting the Cross of Jesus as the way in which God was ushering in salvation and with regard to accepting the much hated Gentiles as being included within God's purview of salvation.

The occurrence of Peace being both conferred and withdrawn finds two expressions in the Gospel. In the story of Jesus sending the seventy on mission – a story found only in Luke, first of all Jesus instructs the missionaries not to salute anyone on the way. The normal Jewish way of salutation is the salutation "Shaloam" (Peace). He instructed them however, to greet the house which they chose to enter with the greeting of "Peace". If the householder was willing to be enlisted as a mission partner and so readily welcomed them and offered hospitality, then the "Peace" they conferred through the greeting would abide in the house. Should the household not be willing to be enlisted as mission partners for the establishment of God's reign of

justice then peace would return to the apostles sent out by Jesus (Luke 10:1-9).

Jerusalem itself becomes a place which chooses to reject this offer of God's Peace. So the peace that was originally conferred through the greeting of the angelic host is now symbolically withdrawn (Lk 2:14 & 19:37-44). Luke communicates this through the greeting of the Galilean followers of Jesus who enthusiastically hail Jesus riding upon an ass into Jerusalem as the coming KING in the name of the Lord, who also sing "Peace in heaven" just before Jesus stops to weep over Jerusalem saying "Would that even today you knew the things that make for Peace! But now they are hid from your eyes."

In Jerusalem, however, there were people eager to listen to him and there were the women who wailed and lamented on the way to the Cross. There was the householder willing to offer him and the disciples a place to celebrate the Passover meal. All these people act as human shields until the hour of darkness and the hour of the priests enable them to arrest Jesus. Once it was the hour of darkness, Jesus took steps to be identified with the Lawlessness of Jerusalem by making his people bear a sword (Lk 22:35-38). He also indicated to them that they could no longer count on God's protection and providence because Peace was now fully withdrawn from them as well as numbered with the Lawless (See 22:25f and 22:53). Having thoroughly identified with the Lawlessness of Jerusalem authorities Jesus now proceeds to bring the peace that has gone back to heaven back to the earth through his Cross.

God's offer of salvation and peace is not understood and therefore it was rejected leading to the crucifixion of Jesus. God in God's mercy is willing to forgive even that rejection raises Jesus from the dead as a sign of accepting the still rebellious humankind and the risen Lord greets the disciples with the greeting peace never to be withdrawn. This peace will permeate and penetrate into the whole world. What is not so obviously stated is the reference to the lawlessness of armed militants. This is most certainly alluded to and made more explicit in the portrayal of the Cross. In all probability in the understanding of Luke Jesus had taken a less sterner view of the violence indulged in by the rebellious militants than the organized violence indulged in with impunity by the leaders of religion and politics.

## **2. Luke's Portrayal of the Cross**

As we have already seen in the introduction, each of the Gospel writers wrote their story of the Cross with special nuances. This is obvious from the words of Jesus on the Cross that they record for us. The story of the Cross of Christ refers to two kinds of peace making. The first is with those who conspired and organized the crucifixion and the second one is with the group of armed militants. Both are achieved through the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus prayed for those who had him executed on the Cross saying "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing." Who are these people who did what they did without knowing what they were doing?

Most certainly it was not just the soldiers in charge of the execution. They were only doing what they had been told. They were told that Jesus was convicted of the crime of rebellion against the emperor by putting himself out as the King of the Jews. As soldiers loyal to the emperor they carried out the execution mocking Jesus for his audacity as they went about the job. The prayer was primarily meant for the Jewish leaders, who by their very zeal for their religion could not recognize that they were doing away with the Son of God himself. What are the various aspects of their ignorance?

It may be helpful at this point, before seeking to list out the various forms of ignorance listed in Luke to look at a general observation found in John's Gospel. The Fourth Gospel talks about the "Ruler of the World" (the Devil) having successfully infiltrated Jewish religion and having planted lies. The result is that while the Jewish people believed that they were really worshipping the one true God, who was indeed the parent God of Jesus they did not know him at all, that is why they were unable to recognize who Jesus was (see Jn:6: 44-59 and especially vs. 54 & 55).

With that general assessment let us see the other forms of ignorance from which the Jewish people suffered:

a) They had an exclusivist consciousness of God's special favour towards the Jewish people. They could therefore not put up with Jesus' insistence on understanding God as the God of all – one who was equally disposed towards Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans. Jesus had commended the faith

of the Centurion who sought healing for his servant through a mere word from Jesus as faith he had not seen in all of Israel. He recommended to a Jewish religious leader that if he was keen to follow the path of salvation he ought to follow the humanitarian example set by the Samaritan traveler. He also suggested that the purity pollution consciousness of the Jewish religion was a hindrance to be humanly kind. For it is probable that the priest and the Levite passed by the stricken man on the other side of the road fearing that he may have been dead and going near a dead body would have defiled them and made them unfit for service in the Temple for seven days.

Religious fastidiousness not only prevents us from being humanly kind. When combined with exclusivist prejudices it can lead a whole people to legitimise even genocide. This we see today among many Christian fundamentalists. There are electronic evangelists who back Bush's occupation of Iraq arguing that Bush is carrying out God's unfinished agenda of 3000 years. They claim that King Saul failed to carry out God's instructions via Samuel to annihilate all Amalekites - including women and children and because of Saul's disobedience; they have survived and become present day Iraqis. In their opinion therefore, what Bush is doing now is after all what ought to have been done 3000 years ago! Should we not say that these people do not know God and therefore they are also party to the crucifixion of Jesus?

Religious zeal becomes blind and people so blinded are prepared to imagine God in demonic terms. This is why Jesus said that those who think of themselves as God's favourites are the ones who are most distant from God. For Jesus said, "Many will come from north, south, east and west and will sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but the children of the kingdom will be in utter darkness..."(Luke 13:28 & 29). Simply put, this would be saying, 'If you think you are in and some others are left out, those whom you think are outside are really in but you will surely be excluded'.

b)The other form of ignorance Jewish people suffered from, as do many other religionists today, was that they stubbornly refused to acknowledge that God desired mercy and not sacrifice. Jesus therefore deliberately went about healing people on Sabbath day. A whole big set of 'dos' and

'dents' had evolved around Sabbath observance. Physicians were not to do their work of healing except in crisis situations, which demanded life saving work. But Jesus healed many who were not at the point of death on Sabbath days. He interpreted his ministry in the light of the general understanding that God desired mercy and not sacrifice and on his understanding of why the Sabbath in the first instance was instituted. He taught that God created Sabbath in order to give rest to hard worked labourers and slaves and that Sabbath was not primarily a religious institution. According to John he even questioned the premise that God's rest after the work creation was the reason for Sabbath observance, for he is reported to have said, "I am working and my Father is working still" (Jn 5:17).

Because Jewish leaders could not accept that God cared more about how they treated their slaves over how they fastidious they were about religious practices, they contemplated his killing from the very beginning of his ministry (see Mk 3:6 and compare with Lk 6:11). In short, an exclusivist consciousness, religious fastidiousness, purity-pollution inhibitions and total lack of concern for justice – these we may say constituted the basis of the ignorance of the Jewish leaders who conspired against Jesus and colluded with Rome to get rid of Jesus. All those of us who take pride in our religiosity should be careful that we do not fall into the same pit of ignorance that led to the killing of Jesus as Jesus is present in solidarity with those who have been rejected by society and with oppressed and marginalized peoples.

If we become conscious that we too have suffered from such ignorance we should take courage that we are included within the purview of the prayer of Jesus and so we can be assured of forgiveness. The second kind of peace and reconciliation that emanates from the Cross of Christ, according to Luke is with regard to all people who resort to violence as the means to bring justice. God had promised liberation from the imperial yoke by making the cut down stump of Jesse sprout again and reviving the house of David. However, Isaiah 11 where this revival is promised clearly envisages that the Messiah would restore justice only through his powerful counter logic and by taking the sides of the afflicted poor. This would lead to the lion learning to eat grass and the wolf and the lamb becoming friends. Violence would be totally eschewed in the whole of

creation.

But from the time of the return from exile the Jewish people were subjugated by one foreign ruler or the other. They only had a short time of reprieve during the Hasmonean rule after the Maccabean war. So a series of attempts to break free from the foreign yoke were made through armed rebellion. Each time the powerful military might of Rome prevailed and all insurrectionist attempts had been quelled. But the desire for freedom combined with the belief that it was God's will could not put out armed militancy completely. Barabas who was asked to be released was one such insurrectionist. The word used to describe Barabas was "robber". However, the reason why the people preferred Barabas to Jesus was because they came to think that Jesus could not achieve the much desired political liberation. Although Pilate had Barabas he had two other militants also called robbers crucified with Jesus.

There is an interesting play on the name of Barabas in certain manuscripts of Luke. Barabas simply means son of Abas. Some manuscripts use Jesus Barabas in contrast to Jesus of Nazareth. The name Jesus is the Greek version of Joshua the leader who succeeded Moses and took the people across the Jordan to occupy Palestine. So there is an unmistakable allusion to Barabas as a militant who would otherwise have been condemned to meet with capital punishment for his insurrectionist activities.

Although religious leaders pretended that it was because they were loyal to the emperor they wanted to have Jesus crucified as he claimed to be the King of the Jews and had instigated people to not pay taxes to the emperor, they also assessed the sentiments of the people who were for armed rebellion and so encouraged them to have Barabbas released. This is not difficult to understand, we see this happening all the time. Many religious leaders of today pretend to want to safeguard law and order and the secular character of polity but they wink an eye over forms of religious violence indulged in a quest to have religious theocratic state established

Besides Barabbas there were many who had taken up arms and had been apprehended by Rome. At times Pilate was very ruthless and killed suspected militants without any trial. Once he even ordered his soldiers to enter the Temple and captured and put to death five suspected Galilean militants

even as they were offering their sacrifices and had their blood mingled with that of their sacrifice. (Lk 13:1-5).

It was two such militants simply referred to as criminals who had been crucified with Jesus. One of them repents, i.e. comes to the understanding that contrary to his earlier belief that God approved of armed rebellion to secure freedom from a ruthless and tyrannical regime, God endorsed the non-violent means of Jesus in establishing God's just reign. This is most significant. Amidst tyrannical forms of state oppression armed militancy emerges as a desperate measure. We cannot criticise such militants without also acknowledging the forms of state terrorism which often provides the first provocation.

However, we need also to see that militants who may start out with a sense of fighting for justice also become very brutal and resort to indiscriminate killings to intimidate and win civilian support. Quite often they no longer fight just with their enemy the State, they also start killing those amongst their own people whom they no longer perceive as being sympathetic to their cause. The man who turned towards Jesus was one such militant. He now turns away from that way of life and seeks to be enlisted in God's Kingdom where Jesus' way of living for justice would be the norm. He is convinced that God would vindicate Jesus. The Lord then assures him that he would certainly take him as his companion in the heavenly realm.

It would be interesting to speculate on the heavenly abode referred to as Paradise. But we shall gain nothing by that speculation. We could also waste our time asking whether it was right of Jesus to assure someone of salvation without making sure he got baptized? Such questions would only include us among the religiously fastidious who do not hesitate to kill Jesus in order to hold on to ill conceived religious beliefs. Let us rejoice rather that God is concerned to win over and change the lives of those who had allowed their humanity to be killed in the pursuit of what they thought was commitment to the cause of justice. A blind commitment to narrowly conceived justice without an overall commitment for true peace for all is a dangerous commitment. That is the lesson Luke would have us learn from carefully preserving this episode for us. Having achieved two kinds of reconciliation Jesus now commits his life in the hands of God with a well known prayer for every

Jew who had been taught to pray every night before falling into sleep, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." It is interesting to note that this prayer is part of verse 5 of psalm 31 -another lament psalm.

This psalm, however, is slightly differently structured. Verses 1-8 are a prayer of trustful commitment and the actual lament begins from verse 9 . So Luke also indicates that Jesus was one in solidarity and faith with all the suffering people of God. God vindicates the Son. He is raised from the dead. His first greeting to his disciples is "Peace". Luke would want us to understand that the Peace that had been sent back to heaven because Jerusalem had become blind and the things of peace had been hidden from her eyes had once more become the abode of peace was now destined to become the centre from which the message of repentance and forgiveness was to go out to all corners of the earth.

### ***3. The Portrayal of the Cross in the Gospel According to John***

John, the fourth Evangelist wants us to understand the meaning of the Cross in terms of Jesus' profound reflections before the hour of crisis. The other three Gospels also tell us that Jesus predicted that he would be handed over to the Romans and be crucified. They too record that our Lord believed that God would raise him from the dead. They testify, however, that Jesus was terribly troubled in his heart and had prayed God should find a different way of achieving his purpose if at all possible. The Jesus that John portrays is totally composed. He knew not only that God would raise him from the dead but also that the moment he was crucified would be the 'Hour'. This was the hour at which the world would be judged and the ruler of the world thrown out and all humankind be drawn to a new understanding of the way of the Cross.

Let us see how he goes about telling this story of God in and through the story of Jesus being lifted up as the Son of Man. We recall first all the passages where Jesus speaks about the 'Hour' in terms of the 'lifting up of the Son of Man'. At the very beginning of John's Gospel in chap 3 we find "As Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up". This prophecy does not refer to Jesus' ascension into heaven after resurrection but rather to Jesus being lifted

up on the cross and crucified, seemingly losing his battle against the powerful. In 8:27 & 28 Jesus says, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he." It is essential to understand this text in the Gospel of John for this text brings together Jesus' self-designation as the Son of Man (i.e. as the one who had come down from heaven to incorporate the human collective of the oppressed and Jesus' self-understanding that he was the 'I AM' who was revealed to Moses in the wilderness of Midian. It is important to see the two texts together because Jesus was not simply saying that the Son of Man and God were one. This is something he had indicated several times already. But here he was revealing that the God who was revealed to Moses through the Burning Bush was also the one who had now come down as the Son of Man.

Let us recall the story of the burning bush and the call to Moses. Moses was shepherding his father-in-law Jethro's flock. Suddenly he saw a bush in flames. Strangely, although the bush was burning, it remained green. Out of the green burning bush God spoke to Moses. Most of us take it for granted that the burning bush was merely a gimmick God used while speaking to Moses. But this is not true, for God spoke to Moses through the burning bush before he spoke to him vocally. The Bush that was on fire symbolised Israel. The fire symbolised the persecution they were undergoing under the tyranny of Pharaoh. God gave Moses to understand that because God "I AM WHO I AM" was present with the suffering Israelites, Pharaoh's many attempts to destroy them had not succeeded. The bush remained green and alive. There were those like the two Egyptian midwives Siprah and Puah who had cooperated with God. Perhaps many other mothers like Moses' mother also did not kill their sons but had other Egyptian women adopt them like the daughter of Pharaoh herself. So God always has many partners whom God is able to inspire to be kind and courageous and God is very present together with suffering people everywhere, sharing in their suffering and facilitating them to be courageous and not lose faith when faced with tyranny and oppression. It was the 'I AM' who is always present amongst people who are oppressed who had now come down as Son of Man visibly into human history. Therefore everyone who recognizes the presence of God 'I AM' in the crucified Jesus comes to a true knowledge of God and that truth sets them free from sin.

It is in fact sinful not to understand God in this way. We want a god of power who is favourably disposed to us and whom we can flatter by our worship and religiosity and bend to do what we want him to do. God however, chooses to relinquish power and desists from interventionist methods but prefers to identify with powerless people, suffer together with them and thereby enable them to confront and win over powers of oppression. Only those who recognize God as 'I Am' in this way can find and relate to the true God and parent of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only with this background should we understand Jesus' saying, "I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me". For now the text assumes a different meaning altogether.

Most of us think it provides a neat endorsement for our exclusivist belief that only we are blessed by God. Not at all. On the contrary it is something that challenges our ideas about God radically. We must understand that many will come to a real and lasting relationship with God simply by caring for those who suffer as God is always present in them. For example let us look at the story of Moses in Egypt. He was brought up in the palace as a son of the daughter of Pharaoh. The religious environment he grew up in was the religion of the Egyptians. But he found out that in fact he belonged to the Israelites. When he set out to see the condition of his kinsfolk, he saw an Egyptian task master scourging a fellow Israelite. He impulsively intervened and killed the Egyptian task master but then fearing the wrath of Pharaoh he had to flee into Midian. This act of Moses expressing his solidarity with an Israelite undergoing torture is interpreted by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews as an act of faith in the Christ as 'Seeing him who was invisible' (Heb 11:24-27).

So expressions of solidarity with the oppressed even when there was no faith understanding should be seen as faith in the Christ even if the historical Jesus is not known and understood. It is this very same understanding specifically articulated on the basis of the story of Moses, which is reiterated in the Johannine understanding of Christ who declares, 'I AM the way, the truth and the life'. The third text which also refers to the 'lifted up Son of Man' is found in Jn 12:27-36. This passage starts off with Jesus admitting that his heart was troubled but that he would not pray to have the 'Hour' removed as it was for the 'Hour' that he had come

into the world. So he prayed to God asking that God's Name be glorified. Then a voice from heaven said that God had already glorified God's Name. Jesus declared that that voice was not so much addressed to Him but to the people with whom he was conversing.

This is because Jesus always lived in the Knowledge and presence of God, as God's Name is glorified in and through moments of trouble and turmoil. He needed no assurance. Then Jesus proceeds to explain how this ever present reality is to be understood particularly through this HOUR of time in human history:

He envisions the world as being polarized into two ongoing realities. On the one side is the human collective of suffering people who are represented by the 'Lifted up Son of Man on the Cross' while on the other side is the Ruler of the World and all the people of religion who follow an imaginary superman-god, who nurture feelings of exclusivity, who endorse a culture of domination, who swear that the world of domination – be it male domination or caste discrimination is in fact divinely ordered. But the hour of truth dawns on them at the hour of the lifting up of the Son of Man. They come to realize that this way of life in the end hurts not only those who suffer but the Son of God Himself. They were in fact party to the crucifixion of Jesus the Lord of Life. When truth so dawns upon them they are drawn by the Lifted up Son of Man into seeking a new repentance from the human collective of suffering people. When such repentance takes place the Ruler of the World loses his grip over people.

Sadly the Ruler of World is able to maintain his hold through a series of religiously approved and culturally accepted lies. This world of anti-God religion and God spurned culture stands exposed in all its nakedness during the 'Hour' and is therefore judged and the Ruler of the world gets thrown out. If this dream of our Lord is to come true we need to realize which of the two polarities we belong to. With that question in mind let us now turn towards the Cross as portrayed to us by John by looking at the three sayings found only in his Gospel.

The first word of the Son of Man on the Cross was to his Mother as "Woman". He seems to want to remind us that he was in fact the Son of Woman who had to be called Son of Man in accordance with the ways of the world. Jesus

addressing his mother Mary, as "Woman" goes on to point to his beloved disciple and says that there after he would be her son. God said in the garden of Eden that the Serpent's head would be crushed by the Seed of Woman. This is recalled also by Paul in his letter to Galatians where Paul says that God sent God's son into the world and caused him to be born of a woman. These are all allusions to the fact that in the incarnation God did not allow the privileged male to have any part except of supporting partnership through Joseph. The lifted up son of Man addresses his Mother as "Woman" to remind the world from that time onwards that womanhood ought to receive a new status of respect. Because the world is saved through the Lifted up Son of Man in whom was present suffering womanhood and who was himself Son of Woman much more than the Son of Man.

Jesus' call to the Beloved Disciple is a general call to the Church to honour and respect Mary but also to treat women thereafter with a new sense of deference investing womanhood with dignity denied to it so far in the name of God.

The second and the third word belong together. They only reinforce what we have been taking note of in the other two portrayals of the Cross. Once again another Lament Psalm is recalled. This time it is Ps 69. This psalm speaks of the oppressive structures of the world which extract from those whom they oppress even that which they do not owe. Such exploitation we see even today in the many cases of bonded labour and in the sweatshops of mass production. Jesus thirsts as a result of standing in solidarity with them and experiencing the same agonies. The world is never ready to do real justice. It is always ready to offer palliatives. That is what the soldiers do by offering sour vinegar to quench the thirst of the Son of Man.

So with that fulfillment the final debt 'owed' to the exploitative world is paid off and they have no further right to demand that which is not really owed. The final word "It is finished" was the phrase used in those days by the secular world to write against promissory notes. When the debt was fully paid back the shopkeeper supplying on credit wrote "It is finished" across the Account Book to indicate that what was owed had been paid back. So once again we see the Son of Man paying off the extortionist debt on behalf of the

collective of suffering and exploited humanity. I stress again that the debt was not paid to God. God is no unjust extractor who demands and extracts what is not really owed to him as the earlier part of Psalm 69 clearly indicates. Rather, it is God in and through the Son who paid off the imaginary debt reckoned falsely and unscrupulously in order to pave the way for the liberation of the exploited to make the exploiters repent and liberate those whom they hold under bondage.

### **AN INVITATION TO STUDY**

Does all this sound as if it were farfetched and fallaciously read into Scripture? I invite you to patiently read through the biblical passages I have pointed out, observe anew the injustice which has so far enjoyed divine sanction and ask whether we have been worshipping a God of Love and Justice who spared not God's own Son or if we have been worshipping a demonised god. God in God's mercy will lead you into truth. Changes cannot come overnight. But once realization dawns on us and we let the light of the Gospel of God's Reign of Peace dispel all darkness we shall soon find ourselves serving God's purposes at least in limited ways. The little that we wholeheartedly offer God will multiply manifold and we shall have contributed to the hastening of God's Future. Amen