



The Mar Thoma

ECHO

Love
came
down



A Publication of the Council of Mar Thoma Parishes in Europe



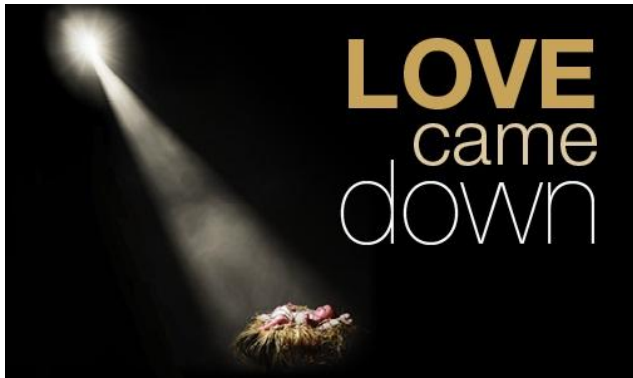


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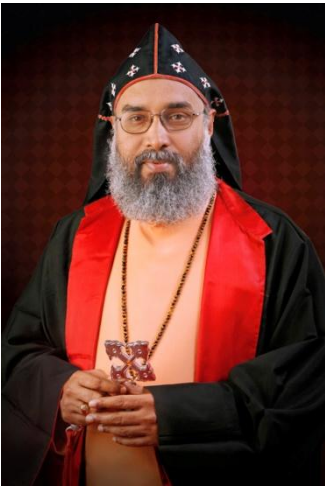
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Message From the Diocesan Episcopa



Dearly beloved in Christ,
Greetings from *Sinai Mar Thoma Centre* at
this season of Christmas!

Advent season brings hope to the world by recognizing the presence of God as 'Immanuel'. The Christmas Eve reminds us God's intervention in the life of humanity and the possibility of living with peace in a chaotic world. As the faith community, we could exist giving witness to Jesus Christ and the vision of our forefathers. Sixty years of existence in the continent of Europe gave ample opportunities to relate to the communities around and to be a beacon of light to the people.

At this time we should be thankful to God for the blessings that we received and the Divine guidance in the life of the church. Happy to note that the long cherished dream of the Mar Thoma community in the United Kingdom and Europe has found its fruition in the decision of the Episcopal Synod by giving it independent Zonal status. It calls for added responsibility to all parishes and congregations, in making the life of the faithful more vibrant and

rewarding. As the celebration of Christmas echoes joy to the world, the gift in all respects brings renewal and strength to all believers.

Let the angelic voice, 'Do not be afraid, I bring you good tidings of joy' be an ever inspiring message to all hearts that are disturbed and to all communities that are in fear of threat. The world today looks for peace and harmony, as an essential element for a healthy living in the household of God. Jesus Christ, the Prince of peace, is the answer to the discomfort and conflict that come across in the human relationship. Hundreds of innocents are killed due to inhuman acts perpetrated by disoriented miscreants in many parts of the world. It is time that all men of goodwill consciously work together to overcome the threat of exclusion and destruction. It is our wish that the celebration of Christmas and the vision for the New Year may be geared with power of the Holy Spirit, so that all may experience the Divine presence and continues to pray 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.

I wish to express my appreciation to the editorial board of the online magazine ECHO for the service rendered in getting connected to the members of the Mar Thoma Community. Pray that the insights and information passed through ECHO be useful and challenging to all who participate through its readership.

Wishing all a very happy Christmas and a blessed New Year!

†Rt. Rev. Dr. Isaac Mar Philoxenos
Diocesan Bishop
Dec 2017

DIOCESE OF NORTH AMERICA & EUROPE

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DC/939/ 17
December 18, 2017

To the Members of the Mar Thoma Parishes and Congregations in UK and Europe,

The Episcopal synod of the Mar Thoma Church held on November 24, 2017 has decided to separate the parishes in UK and Europe from the Diocesan Assembly of the Diocese of North America and Europe with effect from January 1, 2018. The Synod has approved Council of Mar Thoma Parishes in Europe (COMPE) to function as the coordinating body of the parishes in UK and Europe

As such, the parishes in UK and Europe will be functioning as a separate zone of the Diocese of North America and Europe with independent nature through COMPE. Present diocesan assembly members will be the assembly members of COMPE for the present term. The zone will be functioning on the basis of the approved Articles of Incorporation and by-law of COMPE.

The present office bearers are authorized to convene the General Body/Zonal Assembly of COMPE as per the by-law and elect the executive council/ board of trustees for the present term.

I am happy that the long-cherished dream of the Europe region has been materialized. It also calls for more commitment to take up responsibilities in planning and implementing programs for the spiritual upliftment of the faith community, for wider visible expression of the Mar Thoma Church in the region and for the expansion of God's Kingdom. May the Triune God be the guide and strength in promoting the gospel message through the witness of the Mar Thoma Community in the years to come.

Yours in Christ's Service,

Rt. Rev. Dr. Isaac Mar Philoxenos
Diocesan Episcopa



Editorial

Hope for Christmas and the New Year

“And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”

And he replied: Go out into the darkness,

And put your hand into the Hand of God.

That shall be to you better than a light and safer than a known way.”

So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God,

Trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills,

And the breaking of day in the lone East.”



This poem by Minnie Louise Haskins was an important part of the 1939 Christmas broadcast by King George VI. Miss Haskins was a missionary in Madras and finally retired as an academic at the London School of Economics. This Christmas message struck a chord with the people in the UK and the Empire facing the fear and uncertainty

of the Second World War. We are also living under all kinds of threats from terrorists as we experienced at Manchester, London and other places. We had the tragedy of Grenfell Tower in Kensington; we are now facing the uncertainties of Brexit negotiations and the uncertain future of European immigrants living in the UK and the UK national living in Europe. Nationalistic and religious fundamentalist feelings are on the rise. When there is economic depression people try to find scapegoats and victimise them. ‘To tread safely into the unknown’ we need the gift of faith, prayer and hope. A Christian with the gift of faith should be ‘the light and salt’ to the world. Our motto, as Mar Thoma Christians, is simply: ‘lighted to lighten’.

Therefore, it is good to have hope at this Christmas period and in the New Year, the kind of hope that Jesus brought with his Nazareth Manifesto at the beginning of his ministry. Isaiah’s prophecy as stated in Isaiah 61 is a clear mission statement of Jesus. The focus is on the poor, the broken-hearted, captives, and prisoners. But Jesus’ vision doesn’t stop at individual happiness and personal salvation; it is for the whole society, its economy and the environment. Politicians produce juicy manifestoes at the time of elections and offer hope, but often they do not deliver their promises. Jesus’ Manifesto is different; it is from a God of unconditional love and He expects to establish the kingdom values in partnership with us. What had seemed at best a hope in Isaiah’s prophecy, at worst a vague mystery, suddenly came alive hundreds of years later when Jesus read these words in his home synagogue at Nazareth and said that it is now fulfilled ([Luke 4: 20,21](#)).

For most people, Christmas is a just a family occasion of giving and receiving, forgetting and forgiving, remembering and renewing friendships. It is also a time of reaching out to our families and friends to make them happy. In all of this we may miss the message God wants us to hear and transmit to others. For many people, however, the Christmas story is pure fantasy, a story for the children. The shepherds on the first century Palestinian hill side had no problems. It was their first Christmas! Unhindered by tradition and preconceived ideas, commercial pressures, they heard very clearly what God was saying to them. God spoke to them in a spectacular way. They were afraid, but not side tracked by the sight and sounds of God's glory and His angels; they did not miss the message God had for them on that very special night, "go to Bethlehem, where you find the saviour of the world."



The scene at Bethlehem was not very spectacular in a worldly sense – a baby and his parents in a cattle shed. The wonder of the advent season is that the Son of God came to a very ordinary, falling world which was full of disappointed people fast losing hope. God confirmed His message by doing what He said He would do. God speaks to us in spectacular ways and by working out His promises in our lives. If we miss the message it is because we cannot distinguish

His voice through sounds of Christmases Past and present.

I believe there is more to Christmas celebration and the secular world is missing out on it. Perhaps it is only in the relatively trivial incidents of our daily lives that human beings can see God. Maybe effort of the thoughtfulness of buying presents and sending cards, or attempting to heal some of those painful divisions that comes between members of a family or a parish does reflect more truly the idea of "God with us" than any amount of talk about salvation, paradise and eternal life. The story of Jesus is one of giving himself away, to the shepherds, to the Magi and, above all to His Father. The story of Jesus is also one of spreading light, at Christmas; Jesus, the light, shines in the darkness, but very few receive the light: Mary, the mother of Jesus, and a few shepherds. Our world needs witnesses more than it needs preachers. Christmas will have its true meaning if people see us living out our faith with courage, if they see that we are a community where there is kindness and forgiveness, if we reach out to hold and to heal the wounded, the weak and the suffering among us then others will know who we are, and what we are celebrating at Christmas. Therefore, Christmas to me is a time for reaching out; when each of us must give thanks for the goodness we have experienced from God and seek to share that goodness with others. This is the only way, the Christian way, of rescuing the crude commercialisation of Christmas in the high streets.

During Christmas season we are aware that joy and happiness are always just around the corner of a world filled with crises, terrorism, and many individual concerns

and troubles. It is a time to recollect that it is God who came in search of us; it is a time to realise that “a bridge cannot be built from here to there, but it can be built from there to here.” The Tower of Babel was a disaster. Human needs are beyond human help and we certainly need God’s help in becoming harbingers of hope to others around us. It is good to think that something better is beyond the immediate horizon, if we lighten up and become more God-centred. Christmas season should give us every reason to relax, but often there are stresses present; some because of the circumstances we are in, and some of them are of our own making. Our faith, prayer and friendship have much to do to allay these stresses. It is nice to recollect that even the very first Christmas was not without worries and problems.



Mary and Joseph had their own unique concerns. Joseph was unable to comprehend one so beautiful, so pure and as innocent as Mary, his one love, to be with a child of amazing mystery. How could it be? What is the explanation? How will the birth occur? Who will help in their journey? What will the future bring? Therefore, Joseph had

three immediate hurdles to cross at that time: understanding the condition of Mary and her pregnancy; getting to Bethlehem with a pregnant wife for the census, as required by law, and finding a place suitable for the birth of a child. Joseph is a model for us all to face our day to day problems, in becoming an answer to problems facing others by doing our duties and resolving what seem to be life’s insoluble problems.

Some regard these stresses can be relieved by throwing money at them and the totally taking charge of doing things ourselves and by ourselves. A problem shared is a problem solved; at Christmas we have the opportunity to send little packet of worries or bundles of joy to others to share with. We can place our worries and concerns at the feet of our Lord. Mary and Joseph were totally open to God's will, and that relieved their stresses in miraculous ways, with an inner peace and serenity which all of us crave for.

It is indeed a good time for sharing our concerns and joy because ‘a bridge has been built from there to here.’ Christmas is meant to celebrate the most spiritual act of self-giving the world has ever known. It is now substituted by the largest show of materialism ever witnessed; it is the utter defiance of God's gift by worshipping at temples of materialism in the form of the Christmas parties and gifts. Are we caught in the web of this gift-giving and partying to a point where, if we strive to opt out, we will be ostracized by society? Are we too far diverted from the true meaning of Christmas? Do we able to think of giving non-material gifts at this Christmas? What should be those non-material gifts? Christmas is about what it could be and not

what it has become today. Be the first to start to break the power of materialism that holds us by the jugular vein. We need to start at some point; this season is a good one to start. “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain” (psalm 127: 1). Hope is equivalent to the oxygen in the air that we breathe, without the oxygen there is no life, and without hope in Christ there is no spiritual growth. St. Paul wrote to Corinthians about three lasting qualities in life—faith, hope and love, but the great of them is love. These are God’s amazing gifts to us.

Thirumeni’s message has a very significant statement for our community in Europe. We have been praying and hoping for this for many years for this to happen. Thirumeni wrote: “Happy to note that the long cherished dream of the Mar Thoma community in the United Kingdom and Europe has found its fruition in the decision of the Episcopal Synod by giving it independent Zonal status.” We have many people to thank for this announcement: Our Metropolitan, Diocesan Bishop, and Very Revd. V. T. John, P. M. Mathew, Mr. Jaffey Chacko, Mr. Noble Mathew and many others. We record our gratitude to all of them. By the grace of God, we also have obtained charity registration for ‘the Council of the Mar Thoma Parishes in Europe (COMPE)’ from the Charity Commission. These are amazing miracles that we received in our Diamond Jubilee year. These are also significant milestones for our community,

and let us continue to thank God all His blessings over the last sixty years.

Let us keep thinking about the gift of our friendships, friendship in Christ, as a starting point. This friendship is very special; faith itself is friendship; it is simply living within the life of the other, with an ‘I-Thou’ reverence and respect. May the peace and joy of Jesus be with us all at this Christmas, May the Holy Spirit heal, renew, and teach us what He wishes us to see. We wish you all a very happy Christmas and a blessed New Year.

**Dr. Zac Varghese,
For the Editorial Board**



ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

Christmas 2017

The Archbishop of Canterbury's Ecumenical Christmas Letter

'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people'
(Luke 2. 10)

Earlier this year I made a very moving visit to the Holy Land. Amid a busy schedule of meetings and visits there were some moments of stillness and prayerful encounter with the living God. At the traditional sites associated with Our Lord's life, ministry, death and resurrection we were able to stop and to pray. In Nazareth we prayed with Mary, the Mother of God, at the site of the annunciation; in Bethlehem, amidst the activity of restoration works in the Church of the Nativity, we found that place of quiet where Christians come to venerate Jesus' birth; in Jerusalem, in the restored *aedicule* within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre we rejoiced in the resurrection of our crucified Lord.

The gospel story, the saving story of Jesus Christ is good news indeed. The Gospel according to St Luke tells us the story of the good news announced to the Shepherds. On the hillsides above Bethlehem the Angel of the Lord appeared and brought good news. The good news was none other than the birth in Bethlehem of a Saviour, the Christ, the Lord.

This year we have learned a new phrase in various parts of the world. This phrase is 'fake news'. Fake news is dishonest; it is deliberate misinformation published in order to deceive, to confuse and disrupt. Fake news is used as a weapon to achieve dishonest advantage and to subvert honest debate and discussion. It is the antithesis of the good news. Fake news is but lying and does not come from God.

But we like the Angels proclaim good news and, like the Shepherds, we receive good news. The good news is good news for all people, whatever their situation in life. It is good news for politicians and leaders but is also good news for the refugees and displaced persons who continue to flee from danger and seek safety and sanctuary. As St Gregory Nazianzen writes:

He who gives riches becomes poor, for he assumes the poverty of my flesh, that I may assume the richness of his Godhead. He that is full empties himself, for he empties himself of his glory for a short while, that I may have a share in his fullness. (Oration 38. 13)

This is truth and this is good news. As receivers of the good news we are called to pass on the good news and to make real the promise of that good news to those in need. In a poem reflecting on the evangelist St Luke, the poet and priest Malcolm Guite wrote:

*He breathes good news to all who bear a burden
Good news to all who turn and try again,
The meek rejoice and prodigals find pardon,
A lost thief reaches paradise through pain,
The voiceless find their voice in every word
And, with Our Lady, magnify Our Lord.*

(from 'St Luke', in *Sounding the Seasons*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012))

This Christmas I pray that we might, as Christians with one voice, proclaim again the good news that is our salvation in Jesus Christ.

*in His Peace,
+ Justin Welby*

The Most Reverend and Right Honourable Justin Welby
Archbishop of Canterbury

Reflection of the Month:

The Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem was not easy

[Published with permission from the editor of the CTE newsletter - source: December, 2017 newsletter.]

Cardinal Vincent Nichols,
Archbishop of Westminster and CTE
President writes:

As TS Eliot wrote: 'A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year for a journey, and such a long journey: the way's deep and the weather sharp, the very dead of winter.'



The shepherds, too, in their journey to the crib had a mountain to climb, the mountain of social exclusion, for they were the lowest of the low, not welcomed anywhere. Yet both shepherds and scholars found their way to the manger and to the person of Jesus whose coming remains the hinge of human history.

Many aspects of our society today are distanced from this saving truth of Jesus of Nazareth. We live in a culture that wants to push religious belief out of sight, into the margins. Now we have a long journey to make, finding our way through these barriers, through this thickening forest, to the true source of our joy and stability, Jesus, the One alone who is the truth of God fully expressed in our flesh.

It is His coming, which we celebrate in the holy season. We can do so with a profound and lasting confidence that He who conquered death itself can also penetrate our darkness. His coming tells us that such is his deepest desire: to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, no matter how far we may have wandered. He summoned the shepherds, in their place of work, with music and brightness; He called the wise men through their scholarship and desire to know. He calls each one of us, if we have the sensitivity to recognise that summons!

We read that the wise men returned to their 'old dispensation', no longer feeling at home there. In the presence of this Christ-child they discovered something that remained in their hearts, an enduring peace and joy which they could no longer push to one side. We believe that they went home as men more wise, as men more peaceful in themselves, as men more poised in their lives.

The shepherds, too, we know, went home full of song and gladness for what their eyes had seen.

This is the invitation offered to us this Christmas. And its fruits can be the same for us too!

Good News for the Mar Thoma Community in Europe

2017 has been a year of miracles, let us thank God

In the Bible we see so many beautiful and soul searching verses on giving thanks to God. For the Mar Thoma community in Europe, 2017 has been year of thanksgiving for God's manifold blessings to us. In Psalm 118 we read: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures for ever." How do we know God is good? Psalmist says: "Taste and see that God is good." As a Mar Thoma community in Europe, that is what we have been doing over the last sixty years. God also has given us an opportunity to express our thanks collectively during our Diamond jubilee celebrations.

Two amazing things have happened to us by the grace of God. Firstly, the Sabha Council and the Episcopal Synod have decided to give us an independent zonal status from January 2018.

Secondly, the Charity Commission has allowed 'The Council of the Mar Thoma Parishes in Europe (COMPE)' to be a registered charity. Therefore, we have much to be thankful for, and God is worthy of our ultimate gratitude in all things. The Christian ought to be a thankful person. Let us follow St. Paul's advice, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:4-6). "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything

give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).



Pearls of Wisdom

Fr. Thomas Punnapadom, a Catholic priest and theologian, sent the following quotation for us to meditate over this advent time. It is worth spending time on this short reflection on religion and the impact of the Gospel in our lives.



[Somebody once asked a Christian friend, “I can’t understand you Christians because India is the home of many religions that it is an exceedingly religious country. Why then do you introduce yet another religion and add to the confusion? Surely, India has enough religions.”

The Christian friend answered, “Friend, I’m not interested in *religion*, but I’m deeply interested in the Gospel. I would not walk across the streets for *religion*, but I’m willing to go around the world for the sake of the Gospel. There is a difference between the two.”

Religion is man-made; the Gospel is God given,

Religion is what man does for God; the Gospel is what God has done for man,

Religion is man’s search for God; the Gospel is God’s search for man,

Religion is man trying to climb the ladder of his own self-righteousness, with the hope of meeting God at the topmost rung; the

Gospel is God coming down the ladder of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and meeting us as sinners at the lowest rung (forming the steps of a ladder), Religion is good views; the Gospel is good news.

Religion is good advice; the Gospel is glorious announcement.

Religion takes a man leaves him as he is; the Gospel takes a man as he is and makes him what he ought to be.

Religion ends in an outer reformation; the Gospel ends in an inner transformation.

Religion white washes; the Gospel washes white. Religion often becomes a farce; the Gospel is always a force, the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes.

There are many religions, but only one Gospel.]

The Meaning and Significance of Christmas

(John 1:14, 16.17)

Very Revd V.T.John

When we hear the term 'Christmas' the virgin birth of Jesus, songs of the angels and the star come first to our mind as a flash. To get a vivid picture of this, we have to fully depend on Gospels. When Luke and Mathew explain the birth of Jesus, John is not giving much information, though he admits it. When Mark begins his account of Jesus with his baptism and Mathew and Luke with his conception and birth, John goes back to creation and indeed beyond it. The prologue of the 4th gospel is the philosophical beginning of the history of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. John used current vehicle to express the cosmic personality of Christ, Logos for Greek, and memra and debar for the Hebrew, the corresponding vedic term for logos vac which means wisdom or Word. John declares that the Word actually came to the earth in the form of a man, and was seen by human eyes. According to John, this Logos is God. It was this Logos which was incarnated. Though we have to say much on this Logos, I would like to explain the meaning and significance of Christmas in the light of Johannine account.

What is the meaning and significance of Christmas? What does birth of Christ proclaim to us?

Birth of Christ proclaims that this World is good and God loves this world.

The birth of Christ reveals that this world is good. But many hold the belief that material world is not good. Epicurean school taught that this world is not a creation of whole –

perfect God. Gnostics believe that matter is evil, so there cannot be direct relation between the whole – perfect God and this evil material world. Advaita says this material world is 'maya'. Even in Christian circles, too many hold the belief that this material world is evil. So they try to run away from this world. The coming of Christ showed that this material world is not evil. But evil is created by man. There is no ontological existence of evil. Genesis 1:10 says, "God called the dry land Earth, the waters that were gathered together he called seas. And God saw that it was good." Thus God himself says that this world is good. God, in Christ, took a human body John 1:14 "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Thus he showed that the world is not evil.

Where we feel the presence of God, that place is good and holy. Since the living God is still with us and among us, we can boldly say that this world is good. God and evil can never co-exist. John 3:16 says "For God so loved the world that gave His only Son. . . ." So God loved this world so much that he sent his only begotten Son. This world is created by God. He saw this world is good. In the great affirmation that "The Word became flesh and we beheld His Glory" (John 1:14), it is implicit – a whole theory of the relation between Spirit and matter. William Temple says, "Christianity is the most materialistic of all great religions." The kingdom of God begins in this world itself. So this world is where the Kingdom of God begins, is good.

Birth of Christ proclaims that God is with us.

He tabernacled among us. In the days of redemption of Israel from Egypt, the divine Glory had tabernacled in visible brightness.

God would again tabernacle with men (Eze 37:27): “My tabernacle also shall be with them, and I will be their God.” God’s promise was fulfilled, for he had tabernacled with men in the flesh of Jesus Christ. As the glory of God dwelt in the tabernacle, so the Word dwelt among us. The Apostles and Apostolic Church bore witness for this. The Son of God not only came as man, but He grew as man grows. He passed the stages of human development, “tempted in all points” even as we are. He dwelt among us. He shared the transitory joys and griefs.

God dwells among men in the humanity of Jesus Christ. The tabernacle was human, the indwelling person was divine. Matthew 1:23, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Immanuel.” The meaning of the word ‘Immanuel’ is ‘God with us’. His name itself is the evident that God is with us. Jesus himself says, “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

Greek philosophers taught that God is somewhere away from man, because man is finite and God is infinite. Then how can this infinite God remain with the finite man? But by the incarnation of Jesus the idea of the Greek philosophers was denied and the great truth was established that God is One who is always willing to dwell among His creature, man. It seems that we Christians have forgotten the presence of divine Word among us. In our day to day life we must be conscious of the presence of God. As Tagore says in ‘Gitanjali’ – Where are you seeking God? Open your eyes and see that God is with you. He is with labourers in paddy field. God is around us, with us, in us, and

above us and everywhere. Do we feel the presence of God with us? Christmas is not just a celebration but an experience.

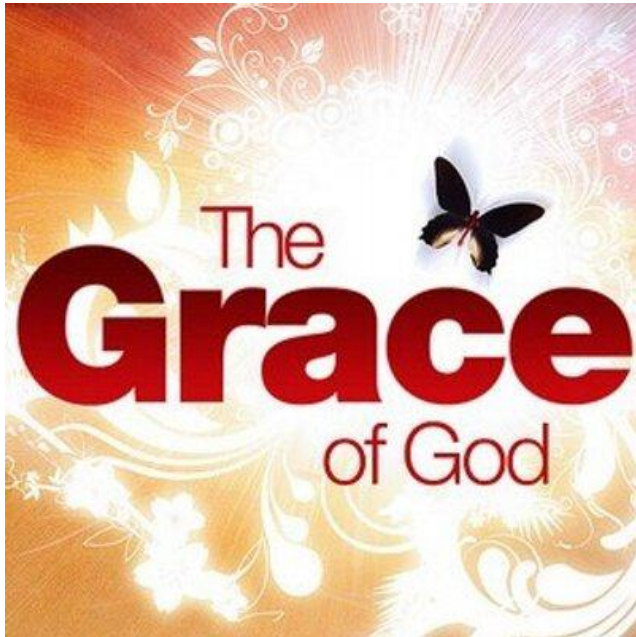


Birth of Christ proclaims that the essential nature of God is Grace and Truth

The term Grace has the idea of something completely undeserved and unmerited. It always has the idea of something that we could never earn, or win, or achieve, or attain for ourselves. The fact that God came to earth to live and die for us is not something which humanity deserved, it is act of pure love on the part of God. In Jesus, God’s grace was fully revealed and Jesus himself is the embodiment of the truth. Jesus came not to talk about God, but show men what God is like. Jesus is the communicator of the truth. He told His disciples that if they continued with him they would know the truth (John 8:31). The truth liberates us from our own fears and weaknesses and defeats – Jesus Christ is the greatest liberator on earth.

In short, while the Grace implies God’s free favour, His inviting, welcoming, winning, redeeming love, the Truth implies the final uncovering of God’s very nature. Christ is indeed the final truth about God; but that truth is surpassingly lovely and gracious.

In Christ we find grace upon grace. The different ages and different situations in life demand a different kind of grace. We need one grace in days of prosperity and another in days of adversity. We need one grace to bear our own burdens and another to bear others' burdens. The grace of God is never a static, but always a dynamic thing. It never fails to meet the situation.



Jews thought that God was a God of wrath. They were of the notion that God would punish the wicked without delay. But Christ through his birth showed that God is full of grace and truth. But one thing we have to do is to apprehend the abundant grace and the ever-flowing love of God revealed through Jesus Christ. But have we really apprehended this grace and love of our master? The moment we ignore this reality will result in nothing but utter failure.

Conclusion:

Now we commemorate the birth of Jesus. It is doubtful whether we give any importance to the significance of it. Though this world has the influence of evil, it is good. Our mission is to keep this world good and to demolish evil. To fulfil this mission, our

Lord is always with us. He is with us not only in our happiness, but even in our miseries. He is the rock of our salvation and the strength of our every action. Are we feeling the presence of God in our day to day life? We must feel the presence of grace and love of God through Jesus Christ. Though we have nothing to claim from God, we are still in God's grace and unlimited love, the very truth of God, expressed through Jesus Christ. That is the source and strength of our Hope.

A Reflection on Christian Hope

Dr. Zac Varghese, London

Hope is a frequently used word at the time



of Christmas. It is used commonly to express a desire without any degree of absolute certainty. For example: we might say, “I am hoping to be with my folks at Christmas.” or “I am not very hopeful in finding a cheap flight at Christmas.” or “I hope to see my dream comes true at Christmas.” There is a degree of uncertainty, the play of Lady Luck or a degree of statistical chance is involved in all such statements. But Christian hope has an absolute degree of certainty because of the gift of faith and grace. For St. Paul faith, hope and love are three lasting things. Christian hope is based on what Jesus taught us: “. . . Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. . . .”

Advent was a period of hope. Israelites were waiting for a Messiah in prayer and hope for a very long time. However, when it happened on those first Christmas days and afterwards they did not appreciate it. But what is our Christian hope and what is the importance of it? When we are bothered and bewildered day by day through the unimaginable cruelty and injustice brought

to us through the news media, it is important that we do not lose confidence and trust in God. However, religion has become a source of division and distress. There is a feeling of inevitability around and a feeling of hopelessness. Increasing dependence on enlightenment ideas of logic, reason, scientific and technological achievements have not saved us preventing man’s inhumanity to man.

Therefore, we begin to think that we need to be saved from ourselves. This recognition that we need to be saved from ourselves puts the idea of Christian faith in focus. Faith in Jesus for establishing kingdom values on earth, love and hope are God’s gift to us to bring transformational changes in the world. We need the Christian hope to overcome crises facing us. Ann Morisy¹ in her book, ‘Bothered and Bewildered’, says: “As Christians we cannot and must not give up on hope. In a dystopian world, hope, if it is to be believable has to be enacted. In fact it always has been the case, but now, when the world is worried rather than optimistic, the responsibility for keeping hope alive has become lonely and urgent.”

One of the foundational theological works on the ‘Theology of Hope’ is from the distinguished German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann². Central to the theology of hope is the incarnation, the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This unique event is the supreme demonstration of God as the one who is faithful to His promise,

¹ Ann Morisy, ‘Bothered and Bewildered’, ISBN 978-184706-480-6, London, 2009

² Jurgen Moltmann, ‘Theology of Hope’: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology, SCM, London, 1967

and who directs men's minds forward in active expectation of something beyond all past experiences. Therefore, faith in Christ gives humanity the hope and expectation of working out all God's promises. What is already known of Christ assures us of the riches of that which is yet to be known. This draws the people of God, the Church, onward in confident search, and in active mission to bring the world within the same divine promise. It is this hope which motivates us to live in 'already-but-not-yet-reality'. Faith and hope are linked and both are God's gift to humanity. "Now Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Heb.11: 1). Hope is nothing else but the expectation of those things which believed to have been truly promised by God.

If faith depends on hope for its manifestation, the sin of unbelief is manifestly grounded in hopelessness. Hopelessness creates resignation, indifference, inertia and melancholy. Sin is the evil one does, but also the good one does not do. The sin of omission has its ground in hopelessness and lack of faith. Hopelessness may assume two forms, one of presumption and other of despair. Presumption is a self-centred complacent anticipation of fulfilment; on the other hand, despair is an arbitrary decision of the non-fulfilment of what we expect from God. Hence both presumption and despair are opposed to hope.



Patience is an important aspect of hope. In the Old Testament stories, our patriarchs had to wait for the fulfilment of God's promises to come true. Abraham and Sarah had to wait for 25 years for the Child of God's promise, Isaac. God first revealed to Abraham, when he was 75 years old, that he would be the father of many nations when he called him to leave his country and go to the land God would show him. Fifteen years later, when Abraham was 90, God renewed his promise. Ten years later, at age 100, Abraham and Sarah finally had their son. Israelites wandered through the desert for 40 years. Simeon waited in the Temple his whole life to see the promised Messiah.

The tendency today is to bring the future to the present. Children have no patience to subject themselves to the natural course of adolescence and adulthood, they want to behave like adults and in the process the joy of waiting in hope are lost and the enjoyment of the childhood also is lost in the

process. Newspaper men and women get extra points and acclaim in leaking future events such as reporting the speech of the President or the Prime Minister before they had an opportunity to deliver it. We are keen to hear tomorrow's news today. We want to fast forward and bring future to the now because it is in the now we live, move and have our being. Waiting is part of the spiritual journey to see the fulfilment of God's promises. Both OT and NT give us confidence in a God who is trustworthy and who keeps His promises. Hope is the essential component of this waiting in absolute patience for the Lord to fulfil His promises in His own time and space. However, if we are fortunate there are occasions when God's time and our time, God's space and our space come together for us to have that heavenly joy. The way of holiness is not achieved through hurriedness, busy-ness, or instant creation. The way of God is the way of waiting; the way of waiting is the Christian hope.

Eschatology or the 'doctrine of the last things' is a central aspect of the Christian hope. This is about the second coming of Jesus Christ (Heb.9:28), the final judgement of the world and the consummation of the kingdom. Early Christians expected Jesus to return within a generation of his death (Matt 24. 34; Mark 13. 30; Luke 21. 32). However, the second coming of Christ is the ever living hope of the church, the final event of the gospel. It is an important part of the Nicene Creed as well, and it is graphically described in the Revelation (Rev.14: 14-20; 19: 11-21). When Jesus returns, the righteous dead will be resurrected, and together with the righteous living will be glorified and taken to heaven, but the unrighteous will die. The time of that

event has not been revealed, and we are therefore exhorted to be ready at all times. St. Paul also wrote about the 'doctrine of the last things' (1 Thess. 5: 1-6). Does this eschatological hope prevent man of happiness of the present? This is an important question to consider in terms of 'heaven up there' type of teaching. We are in this world to tackle its problem in partnership with God to inculcate kingdom values with a longing for justice, relationships, spirituality, love and truth.

Psalmist said, "This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118: 24). Whatever the present moment contains, we need to accept it as a gift from God and use it effectively in having a relationship with Him, use it for having a direct and intimate conversation with Him. Eckhart Tolle³ describes beautifully the importance of living in the present moment with its full possibilities in his book, 'The Power of Now'. According to Tolle, as long as you are unable to access the power of now, every emotional pain that you experience leaves behind a residue of pain that lives in you. It merges with the pain of the past, which was already there. This accumulated pain is a negative energy. Pain feeds on pain. Some people develop a pain-complex, they derive a peculiar pleasure from being unhappy, and they mourn and groan at all times. Tolle goes on to say, nothing ever happened in the past, it happened in the now of the past. Nothing will ever happen in the future, it will happen in the would-be now of the future. Now, at this split second, we are in the presence of God, do not spoil it by clouding with anxieties of any kind of the past or future.

³ Eckhart Tolle, 'The Power of Now', Hodder and Stoughton, Great Britain, ISBN 0 340 733500, 2001.

God who loves us is beside us. “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Heb. 4: 20). Do not allow the thoughts of yesterdays and tomorrows to spoil the beautiful and amazing experience of the now and the power of now. It is in the now we love and live.



For Moltmann eschatological hope is not an invitation to withdraw from the world into cloisters in the hope that a better world will somehow evolve, but active participation in this ‘fractured-world’ in order to assist in the healing process in the creation of a better world. Christian hope is essentially a hope for the future of man and this earth promised by the resurrection event of the crucified Christ. The promise of God, our hope, is the ‘propelling force of history’ which keeps God’s people unreconciled to present experience, sets them as rebels against current political, religious, and secular powers. The Church should become a transformative and reforming power for the realisation of righteousness and freedom for all mankind on earth in the light of the promised future that is to come under the grace of God.

Jesus taught us about the kingdom of God and its values; we should study very seriously the messages and manifesto of this Kingdom from the ‘Sermon on the Mount’

and the ‘Nazareth manifesto’. This is a practical code to live in the now with Christian hope. In the absence such teaching, the mind creates an obsession with the future as an escape from the present realities. This is our problem. We are obsessed with an agenda for personal salvation, we are focused on winning a race to reach heaven, but our salvation story is about the salvation of the many. Salvation is not an escape from the world but a common pilgrimage of people within the whole of creation toward unity of all things under the kingship of Jesus. One man’s sin brought destruction for many, but one man’s sacrifice brought salvation for mankind. Jesus told us to pray, but not to an individual’s personal god, but ‘our God’, we pray to our Father; we pray for ‘our bread’; we ask for the forgiveness of ‘our sins’. We need to learn the importance of our collective salvation, and then we begin to see our responsibilities to seek human dignity, peace, justice, equality, freedom, and hope in the face of sufferings, and afflictions. In order to achieve this social transformation we need to give special emphasis on the transformation and liberation of the individual believers. It is all about both the social and spiritual gospel and not one at the exclusion of the other.

Finally, the theology of Christian hope should become a practical code of Christian practice in love. Its task should be to summon men and women to break away from the spell of a comfortable status quo in our understanding of Christianity, and take up the challenge of building a new reality that corresponds to God’s promised future.

Transformation and Liberation: What it Means and How to Achieve?

Dr. P. V. Cherian, Chicago

The word transformation became widely used since the 1960s and 1970s as a new wave of universal thought and awakening of the spirituality of human nature. However, the word became a synonym for changes in the corporate world, the governments agencies and in the new millennium to the everchanging transformation in technology, industries and the daily changes of fashions, style and beauty make over in the secular world. At the present ageless wisdom seeking era, people are running back and forth to gain true wisdom of transformation to liberate them from the entanglements of life.

Learning more about the physical wellbeing is but one facet of present world culture attempting to reinvent the self. Some sit com television programs are all about “make-overs,” remodeling, looking good or even surgically altering one’s appearance, all in the name of some form of transformation. In all these attempts there is a hidden truth that suggests a personal dissatisfaction and unhappiness in life. The present generation, irrespective of age are unhappy with themselves because they do not know who they are, despite religious observance of all organized ceremonies. They are unhappy because they are unsure of their true identity and the purpose of human life.

Every human being struggles with the questions who am I, why I am here on earth, and what is the purpose of one’s life. Many are adrift in the culture without knowing what true transformation is from a biblical perspective. Being a biologist and a medical

scientist with some knowledge in the biblical theology, the analogy for transformation that I can use is the biological metamorphosis of the caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly that flies away from its cocoon, to fulfil its purpose in the ecosphere for which it was created. Every butterfly hatches as a larva, crawls around on the leaves and blades of bushes and trees, eating through its way.



However, they enter a stage called *pupa* during which it may appear dormant, but genetically and physiologically very active. **Caterpillars** spin cocoons during their pupal stage by secreting a silk-like thread wrapping it around their bodies in a figure-eight motion. It produces its own silk thread for the cocoon from the two glands located inside the insect. Inside the cocoon it undergoes dramatic changes, acquiring beautiful pigmentation, its antenna, wings and legs and liberates itself free from the entanglement of the cocoon and flies away. Yes, the butterfly transformed from a larva through cocooning, gained its beauty and sought freedom, but how did it transform? God created butterflies to maintain a well-balanced ecosystem. Nearly 90% of all plants needs pollination and butterflies carry out that role along with bees and other insects. They cannot remain in the cocoon

forever, they must transform to fulfill the purpose for which it is created. Does humanity have a designed purpose to fulfill? We shall be able to fulfill our purpose in life only after a full transformation.

Human transformation must first take place in our mind by which our soul must be fully satisfied so that it does not abscond in the open air when we die, but returns to the *Creator* as the Scripture teaches, “*For then the dust will return to the earth, and the spirit will return to God who gave it*” (Eccl. 12:7). If we know this eternal truth, all our aim must be to transform our soul, which would make total change in our body, mind and spirit for a whole change of personality.

Those of us who are of Indian origin perhaps very well know that the Sanskrit word *Moksha* variously known as *vimoksha*, *vimukti*, *mukti*, a term Hindu philosophy refers to liberty and freedom. In its theological and eschatological sense, it means freedom from *samsara*, continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Psychologically *moksha* means freedom from ignorance, self-realization and self-knowledge. Every major religion, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam teaches the ultimate freedom or liberation of the soul when a person dies. Hinduism believes the soul merges with Brahman, the absolute God, the eternal truth, who does not change, yet is the cause of all changes. The usage of the term *nirvana* is more common in Buddhism than the widely held view of view of *moksha* in Hinduism.

In Christian theology transformation means a renewed life from the life *hitherto* that reflects a new character, attitude,

behavior and a change in total personality that more reflects the likeness of Christ. A transformed person will no longer want to conform to the pattern of the world, but show visible changes by the renewing of the mind in thoughts, actions and faith (Rom. 12:2). A transformed person should be able to prove that his actions and behaviors are good and acceptable to God and fellow brethren. Transformation must liberate us to see that God has only good, pleasing and perfect plans for us, and we humble ourselves to accept the will of God, abide with God’s plan for us, no matter what it might be. Our plans and expectations in any sphere of life may collide with God’s plan for us but accepting God’s will shall liberate us from the constraints of our minds, and our soul becomes free from bondage.



TRANSFORMATION

Transformation helps us to put off the old self which exhibited our former character and manner of living, and put on a renewed newness created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. The mysterious doctrine of Christian theology is that if we live according to the world of sinful nature we do not gain eternal life, but we die with the physical death. But if we live by the Spirit, we put to death our old self, misdeeds and deceitful nature and we live beyond the physical death and live eternally. Thus, a grave is not the end of our lives, just as three nails and a sealed grave could not hold Jesus. This is the truth behind Christian doctrine of eternal life with God.

Different religions explain this in various ways, but God planned a redemptive process for us long before the foundation of the earth. That process is through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Christ is the Son of God and by accepting him we become brothers and coheirs with Christ, our brother (Rom.8:17). This is how we become the children of God (Rom. 8:13-14).

How did a caterpillar become a butterfly? Inside the cocoon it transformed everything in its genes the *Creator* designed for the particular species of that butterfly. God has put into our genome every aspect for the betterment of life in this world, both physical and spiritual by transformation, and thus to fulfill our purpose in life. Each of us has a responsibility to our generation.



The power to grow in the grace of God is not easy nor it comes from within us, but from God through grace and power of Lord Jesus Christ. We humans simply do not have the resources to be truly godly, yet God allows those who are transformed to participate in his divine nature in order to keep us from falling to sin and worldly life. When we are truly transformed, God by His Holy Spirit empowers us with an aversion to worldly sins and a likeness to his own moral goodness. (See John 3:6; 14:17-23; 2 Cor. 5:21 and 1 Pet. 1:22,23).

Transformed life not only liberate us free from the passions of the world but shall strive not to grieve the Holy Spirit so as to

depart from us. Therefore, David sincerely prayed, “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.” (Psalm 51:11,12).

It is not enough to say we are transformed but is very important to know how we are to live our transformed lives. We must have steadfast faith that must exhibit visible virtues in life along with good deeds. Apostle James asked, “What good it is if we claim to have faith but has no deeds; can such faith save him” (James 2:14). Apostle Peter has instructed us what these virtues are, and given us the recipe for obtaining the eternal life for those who are transformed and wanting to liberate them from the abhorrence of this world (2 Peter 1:2-11).

Since the latter half of the twentieth century people have been running to and from in search of knowledge to satisfy the soul and liberate it. Prophet Amos foresaw this trend in eighth century BC and warned that “*People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from border to border searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it*” (Amos 8:12). People are staggering and reeling from west to east, north to south or in any direction they think knowledge is available. The truth of the matter is, in the clamor and clatter of life they haven’t found the true knowledge of transformation from the cocoons of our life.

In a culture that provides satisfaction through self-glory and entertainment many people try to be stars only to find that their stardom is temporary. But God teaches that we can be shining like eternal stars forever by being wise to be transformed to do his

will and lead many to righteousness. Prophet Daniel was told to seal the book of knowledge until the time of the end when many shall run *to and fro*, and knowledge shall increase (Dan. 12: 3-4). We are living at the time of increased knowledge in everything except the true knowledge about God. But a time is coming soon when they will seek the eternal God. Are we transformed to lead others to God?



Being professing Christians, the questions we must ask are: Am I transformed by the grace of God through Jesus Christ? Am I leading a holy life consistent with Christ's teachings? Am I fully liberated from the cocoons of my life to do the will of God? Have I discerned my purpose in life? Am I a new person because Christ lives me? May the Lord help us to answer in the affirmative!

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Hope in troubled times

*Ann Morisy**

Hope is the expectation that virtuous processes will gain momentum. Dismay is the expectation that vicious processes will gain momentum. Increasingly we seem to embracing dismay rather than hope. This presents Christians and churches with a new challenge: To enable people to weigh-up whether the example of Jesus can provide a way of making sense of their lives within a hope filled rather than gloomy future. Such a proposition seems way out of kilter with the assumed ways in which hope and betterment are to be achieved. There is an additional issue: our commending of the faith is undependable because we are perceived as being penned in by group self-interest.

Our efforts at proclaiming hope are sullied because in our secular culture they are not believable and Christians are assumed to engage in naïve apologetics which fails the *test of public reason* commended by John Rawls. In our efforts to commend our faith, we fail in relation to the test of public reason because self-interest taints our commendations. If our claims for the Gospel are to pass the *test of public reason*, then some kind of external proof or validation is needed. This is where positive psychology has become a great ally in our efforts to speak of the everyday – as well as the timeless hope that is at the heart of the Christian faith.



Positive Psychology is a new kid on the block. It dates from 2000 when Martin Seligman began a movement within psychology that focused on ‘what works’ to counter the preoccupation of psychology with mental ill health. Positive psychology seeks to ‘discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive’.⁴ And so often the factors that play a positive part in people flourishing is *people doing business with God*.

Here are a few examples:

American researchers suggest that going to church once a week improves people’s wellbeing equivalent to their salary being doubled (Cited in “Life Satisfaction: The State of Knowledge and Implications for Government” pub. By The Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit Dec. 2002)

Religious experience has survival value i.e. when people feel they are at rock bottom or in a sudden crisis from which they have no way out, the experience of God’s ‘alongsideness’ enables people to ‘dig deeper and hang in. And particularly significantly, having once had a religious experience the person is invariably more open to the needs and fragility of others; Religious experience lessens the likelihood of ‘authoritarianism’ (i.e. assuming one is right and everyone else is wrong) and reassures that ‘all will be well and all manner of things will be well’.

⁴ University of Penn Positive Psychology Center
<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/akumalmanifesto.htm>

These findings are replicated all over (See David Hay, 2006 “Something There” London: DLT):

- Andrew Greeley the Sociology of the Paranormal: A Reconnaissance, Beverley Hills/London: Sage 1975
- Harold Koenig et al. (Article on the link between church attendance and blood pressure) The International Journal of Psychiatry and Medicine Summer 1998
- Michael Argyle The Social Psychology of Religion - 3rd Edition, London: Routledge 1998
- D.G. Myers the Pursuit of Happiness, London: Aquarian Press 1992;

Faith is good for young people... Who says?

- John J Dilulio⁵ ... regularly!
- Leslie Francis and Mandy Robbins ⁶ regarding urban 13-15 year olds in England

In the report “Spiritual health and the wellbeing of urban young people” by Lesley Francis and Mandy Robbins⁷ the following findings were noted:

⁵ Google “John J Dilulio” “Faith Factor” for more, also visit www.religionandsocialpolicy.org also of interest may be “Saving Souls, Serving Society” (2005) by Ronald J Sider and Heidi Rolland Unruch OUP

⁶ “Urban Hope and Spiritual Health: The Adolescent Voice” (2006) Leslie J Francis and Mandy Robbins Epworth Press

⁷ “Spiritual health and the wellbeing of urban young people” by Gwyther Rees, Lesley J. Francis and Mandy Robbins, published by the Commission on Urban Life and Faith, University of Wales (Bangor), The Children’s Society. Copies of this report (two versions are available - 8 page or the fuller 32 page version) can be downloaded from www.culf.org This research has been written up in more detail in “Urban Hope and Spiritual Health: The Adolescent Voice” (2006) Leslie J Francis and Mandy Robbins Epworth Press

Confirmation of lots of other research that having a sense of purpose is important to the flourishing of young people.

Young people were more likely to have a sense of purpose if they:

had a religious affiliation
prayed regularly
believed in eternal life.

Detailed analysis suggested that each of these three factors were independently related to 'sense of purpose' (i.e. these 3 religious factors were not attributable to economic differences etc.). Furthermore, young people who were identified as having a religious affiliation and / or were regularly involved in prayer fared better than other young people on a number of different measures of wellbeing:

- they will more likely to have a 'sense of purpose'
- they will be more likely to have an active and constructive relationship with the community and the environment
- they will be more likely to have positive views towards ethnic diversity.



The independent significance of religious affiliation and prayer in relation to sense of purpose and overall wellbeing suggests that a strong spiritual dimension to young

people's lives might act as a protective factor, promoting well-being and mitigating the impact of other factors such as poverty and family breakup⁸.

Wellbeing and growing old



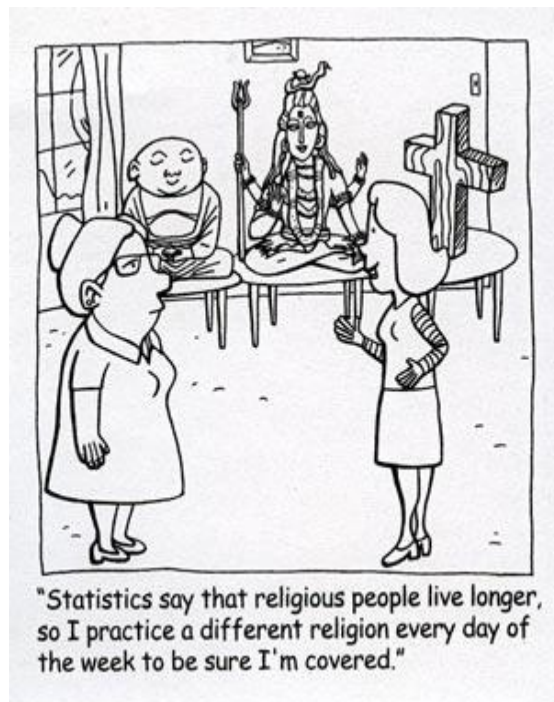
The work of Dan Blazer and Erdman Palmore "Religion and Aging in a Longitudinal Panel" (The Gerontologist, Vol 16 (1) 1976) was foundational for the significant body of research concerning wellbeing in later life. Blazer and Palmer researched a group of older people for fifteen years. Researching how they coped with the challenges and assaults associated with growing old. They wanted to know what factors were linked, not just with psychological wellbeing, but with retaining a sense of usefulness, and adjusting to the limitations associated with old age. Might it be having a healthy bank balance? Might it be having a partner alive? Might it be having people around who would regularly pop-in? Might it be the education level of the person that had an impact? Blazer and Palmore were imaginative enough to explore the extent to which people 'Did business

⁸ The report "Spiritual Health and the wellbeing of urban young people" from which this evidence was drawn was produced in 2006 and was based on the analysis of questionnaires returned by 23,418 young people living in urban areas.

with God', and yes, the factor that had by far the most significant positive impact on people's experience of later life was the extent to which people had put their hand in the hand of God.

I draw on insights from positive psychology so as to pass what John Rawls calls the *test of public reason*. We keen Christians, in our efforts to commend our faith, *fail* in relation to the test of public reason because of the self-interest that enfolds our efforts at commendations: *of course we would say* that following Jesus is good for a person. Basically the test of public reason equates to the old adage that *self-praise is no recommendation*. In our secular world, where there are so many rival ways of making sense of the world, just asserting that 'I have found faith in Jesus to be a good thing' cuts little ice and most likely will result in a cynical response of 'So what?'

If our claims for the hope at the heart of the Gospel are to pass the *test of public reason*, then some kind of external proof or validation is needed. Therefore there is no apology for all the references and footnotes that I've included. They might be tedious and even distraction, but these references are important because that is how to pass *the test of public reason!*



From

<http://lovestats.wordpress.com/dman/>

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O star of wonder, star of night...

(A Nativity Poem)

Rev. Dr. M. J. Joseph, Devalokam*



The Magi's search for the manger in Bethlehem

Guided by the star-"a large ball of burning gas"- in the night sky

*Simeon the senior citizen's vision of **the star of wonder** dwelling on earth*

Kindle in me a ray of hope for a better tomorrow.

The kinetic energy of the Star leading the Persian astrologers to Bethlehem

The hazardous journey of the Gentile-seekers to the Court of the King

The nights' stay of the Magi at the Mar Saba monastery in the Judean desert

Kindle in me a vision of the glory of God outside the Law.

The identity of the Magi as practitioners of occult arts

Their branded name as fortune tellers

Their boasting at the Court of the King Herod

Kindle in me an appreciation of the truth in diverse cultures.

The enquiry of the Gentile seekers and their interpretation of the Scriptures

Their boldness to give a testimony of their reading of the law within their hearts

Their ardent desire to worship the King of the Jews with their treasured gifts

Kindle in me a vision of the breaking of the religious and cultural walls.

A voice from above whispered in my ears:

None has the right to monopolize the Christ - Child in the Crib

He who owns the text may be ignorant of its meaning

He who stands outside the boundary may find a way inside.

Just as a Star is none's possession, so also Jesus, the Universal Child.

The glory of heaven and earth finding a union at the cradle

The insincerity of the King urging us to disobey the powerful

The courage of the wisemen taking a different route

Kindle in me the spirit of obedience to God.

****Rev.Dr.M.J.Joseph,a former director of ECC,Bangalore.***

THE MAR CHRYSOSTOM CONTROVERSY!

Valson Thampu



Recently, on the occasion of the 64th birth anniversary of Mata Amritanandamayi, affectionately known as “Amma”, a virulent controversy broke out. It was occasioned by the centenarian bishop, Senior Metropolitan, Chrysostom Thirumeni of the Mar Thoma Church.

Many voices were heard. Some denounced Thirumeni as a sinner and a betrayer of the biblical faith, hurtling fast to the warmer hospitality of hell. Others hailed him, as a broad-minded Christian. What did Chrysostom Thirumeni do to stir the hornet’s nest?

He attended the mega event, wished Amma well and, to make matters much worse, opined that godliness could be seen reflected in her. He also said, “If I go to heaven after death, and I am asked if I have done any good deed on earth, I will be hard-put for an answer. But I will have this to say, “Yes, there is this one thing I’ve done. I attended Amma’s 64th birth anniversary celebrations.” Thirumeni also lauded Amma for the massive philanthropic works her movement undertakes.

I was amused, but surprised, by the controversy. These days, we should be surprised when something, anything, does not spin into a controversy. We seem to be more interested in controversies than in truth; especially truth about ourselves. I was amused, because I happen to know Chrysostom Thirumeni to some extent.

Thirumeni has been in public life longer than the controversialists in this case have been on planet earth. But it is doubtful if even his ardent admirers understand him or read his messages aright. The main reason for this is something inherent in religion. It trains us to be blind followers, ardent admirers, but not thinkers. For this, the custodians and propagators of religions are to blame. It is an issue worth noting.

What organized religions do is not only to train and enable people to worship God, in whichever form. They also nurture a culture of adoring religious functionaries. That, in itself, need not have been a problem, except for the fact that we have not developed the maturity to worship with our full faculties, including rational capabilities. Our worship -in all forms and traditions- is an experience, mostly, of habitual mental observances without any application of mind.

This issue stems from the conflict instituted between religion and reason. In the process, ‘ritual’ itself remains un-understood. Every ritual encapsulates an indispensable truth, of which not even 1% of worshippers would be aware. Not even 5% of the worship-leaders, or ministers, would be an improvement on the worshippers.

This is an issue that has, I know, troubled Chrysostom Thirumeni for long. How can

we reintegrate worshipping and seeking and make it an experience of light? Didn't Jesus say, "seek and you shall find?" (Mtt. 7:7). Shouldn't worship be also an experience of seeking, finding and knowing God?



I remember Chrysostom Thirumeni saying something far more controversial on the banks of the Pamba at the Maramon Convention a decade and half ago. "What will happen, if the Mar Thoma Church collapses today and ceases to exist?" He asked, and then paused for a response. Got none. He continued-"I will tell you, nothing will happen. The world will go on as usual." The audience laughed. I could not. I was struck by the pain behind Chrysostom's words, unattended by any outward symptoms of anguish.

By the way, the image of Chrysostom Thirumeni as Kerala's "Emperor of

Laughter" is so deeply set in the minds of everyone. As a result, everyone feels obliged to laugh whenever he speaks, and irrespective of what he says. It will be no exaggeration to say that audiences, used to his way of speaking/preaching, will think it a joke even if Thirumeni were to cry! This is not his problem. It's their problem.

So, let's ask: what did Chrysostom Thirumeni mean by what he said on the occasion under reference?

Thirumeni is often lighthearted about himself. If laborious efforts are made to drape him in sanctity, Thirumeni would debunk the exercise, but do so avoiding embarrassment for his well-wishers. Such being certainly the case, it makes sense to read his message as follows: "Look, Amma, I don't know how you fare, but I am certainly not a saint. I have done nothing to impress God, much less attain the status of divinity. When I go to heaven, I will be out of my depth, because no play-acting or pretenses will work there."

Why did he say this? What was the message embedded in this statement?

It is a simple matter that the meaning of a statement must be derived from the interplay between the text and the context. Let's do that.

Amma is hailed as a divine embodiment of the saintly and the superhuman. Thirumeni knows that that this is a quaint piece of genial fiction.

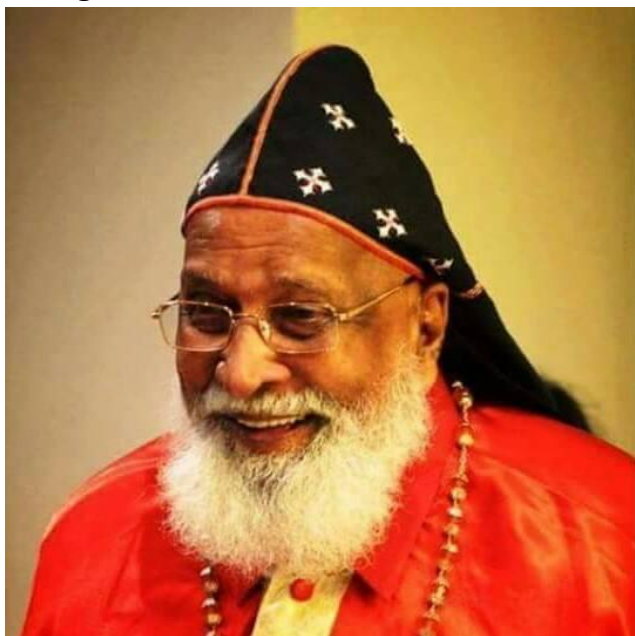
Then you could expostulate and say, "In that case, why didn't you say so?"

He would say, "Well, for two reasons. First, there is something called courtesy, you know? You don't accept an invitation and then reward your hosts with awkwardness,

do you? Second, exalting Amma -or anyone, including Chrysostom- is a popular need. It shortchanges truth, all right. But the people seem to need it. What am I to do? What is poor Amma to do?"

Why did Chrysostom Thirumeni say that the only thing he can claim before God as the good he has done on earth is attending Amma's massive birthday bash?

Well, "subtle sarcasm" is the name of the game. Chrysostom Thirumeni has always been uneasy about exhibitionism and self-advertisement. He takes Jesus words seriously, "Let not your left hand know what the right hand does."



I am quite sure that Thirumeni was, in his own genial fashion, debunking the pomp and show on display. At the same time, I am in no doubt at all that Thirumeni has deep affection for Amma. That's his greatness. He has the rare eye to look at the essential human condition behind the glare and flare of outlandish public displays. He knows, for example, that once the curtain comes down on the massive show, and people troupe out, Amma will be left with the reality of who she is. Like everyone else, she too is an orphan.

That is what we all are, mere cosmic orphans; but for the grace of God.

I am reminded of an Urdu couplet which says, "All through the night I sat and sang, transporting you to a heaven of delight. You did not know that I was entertaining you with a heart heaving with pain." That's pretty much what the truth is, folks.

Chrysostom Thirumeni knows only too well -I have spent many an hour with him in frank discussions and conversations- that no human being can be God. Also, no one can be anybody's amma, unless every woman is everyone's amma. He can peep through the façade of these make-believes; yet, without raining gall on those who maintain it.

It was certainly Chrysostom Thirumeni's incidental intention to make his fellow bishops also to wonder, "By the way, what good are we doing? Where do we stand in comparison to Amma? What are the truths about the many claims and stereotypes we entertain? Isn't it time we sat up and took note?"

It is not for nothing that Chrysostom Thirumeni has lived for more than a century! He has not been idling his time in the backyards of mental vacuity. He is a thinker; but a thinker who couches his profundity in syntaxes of simplicity. God has blessed him with a capacity for self-criticism, with the inner freedom to laugh at himself and courage to interrogate the myths that men and women manufacture encouraged, no doubt, by the spiritual naivete that stalks the faltering steps of our species.

Finally, Chrysostom Thirumeni knows - because he has read, chewed and inwardly digested the words of Jesus- that all the



great and mammoth things we do in this world, the sonorous fanfare we drum up, the pomp and show of manufactured spiritual distinction, add up to nothing in the ultimate analysis. Is that not, clearly and surely, his intent in saying that he will be sorely perplexed and rendered speechless, if asked, “What good have you done on earth?” We can do nothing to impress God. Why? Because God is love. Love does not want to be impressed! Love wants to be loved. And, as St. Paul says in the 13th chapter of the first letter to Corinthians, “Even if I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

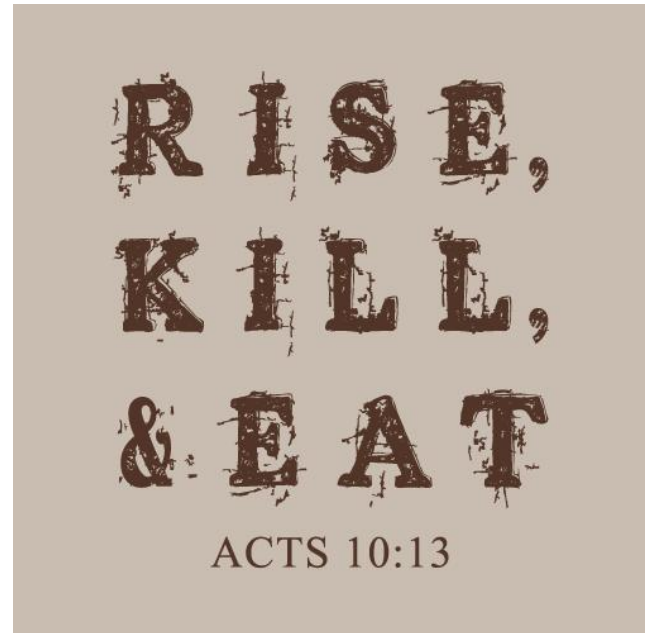
Nothing!

That was what Chrysostom Thirumeni meant, folks. Nothing!

Slow and Not So Steady – The Ways of Liberation & Transformation

Abraham Varghese, Hermon Mar Thoma Church, Birmingham

“Get up, Peter! Kill and eat” (Acts 10: 13).



It happened three times, not one. Peter was hungry, and fell into a trance, says the Bible; and then he had the vision. The heavens opened up, and something like a large sheet was let down to earth. The sheet held a collection similar to Noah’s Ark – birds, animals and reptiles. So far so good, but then came the voice: “Get up, Peter! Kill and eat. “There are those moments when you feel something fundamental that you believed in has collapsed right in front of you like a house of cards. It was such a moment in Peter’s life, I think. The sheet from heaven carried what was considered unclean in Jewish tradition and rituals, and Peter reacted just as any Jew worth his salt would have. However, the heavenly voice shot back: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” In other words, it was rather presumptuous on his part to declare part of God’s creation as unclean; a bit like

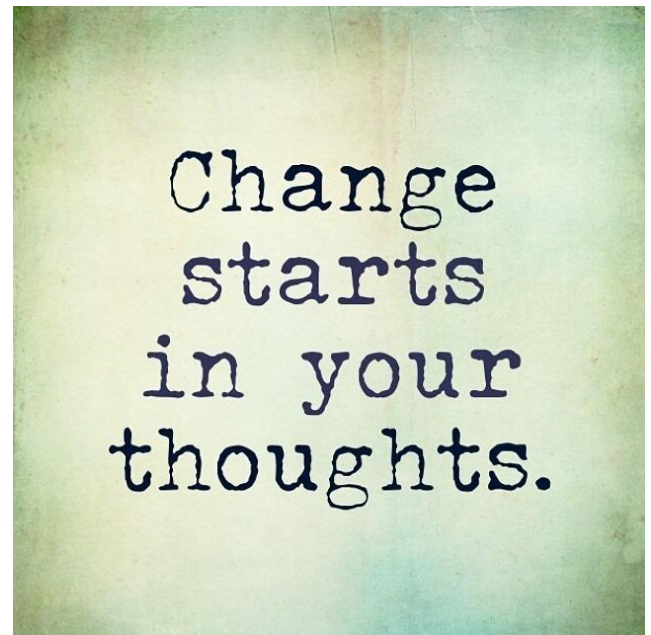
telling the Queen she didn't pronounce some of the words correctly in her speech.

Liberation

Liberation – deliverance, freedom – can be physical; slavery was a horror that trapped many nations and tribes around the world, but has now largely disappeared from civilized societies, thankfully. For slaves, liberation was first and foremost physical; it was physical freedom from the master and owner for whom they were no different from cattle or pigs. But liberation can be something mental and spiritual as well; that's what happened to Peter. His mental picture of what is clean and what is not, changed in the hours that followed the vision. He came to the conclusion that God's love was not restricted to Jews, the chosen people of the Bible; Gentiles were also very much part of God's grand plan for His beloved creation. 'I am only a man myself,' says Peter, later in the same incident – a man, no more and no less than his Gentile visitor Cornelius.

Any brief study of history will reveal the truth that liberation of the human mind is an ever-rolling five year plan. Centuries ago, it was common belief that Kings and other Royals were somehow appointed by God; today, most of humanity will laugh at such a thought. In Jesus' time, people believed that disabilities such as blindness were a symptom of God's displeasure; remember the question posed to Jesus – "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus wasted no time in blasting such a theory out of His universe;

but such remarks are heard even today. The modern world that we inhabit believes that it can be good without God; that a legal system combined with science, technology, industry and widespread education, is all that's required to sustain and thrive as a human society. But the Ten Commandments of the Divine are not so easy to translate to a human legal system; in the year 2010 alone, the United Kingdom, which has existed as a legal union since A.D. 1707, passed 3506 laws. Now imagine the size and scale of the full legal system in the UK, and countries around the world. Who but God Almighty can liberate us from the Leviathans that are our legal and economic systems?



If liberation is about breaking free or being set free, transformation is all about what happens after; what the person, or the society does with the freedom given. The consequences of freedom can never be foreseen; India became a free country 70 years ago, free of the clutches of the British Empire. Much good has been achieved in the seven decades that passed, but I think the country and the people are very far from

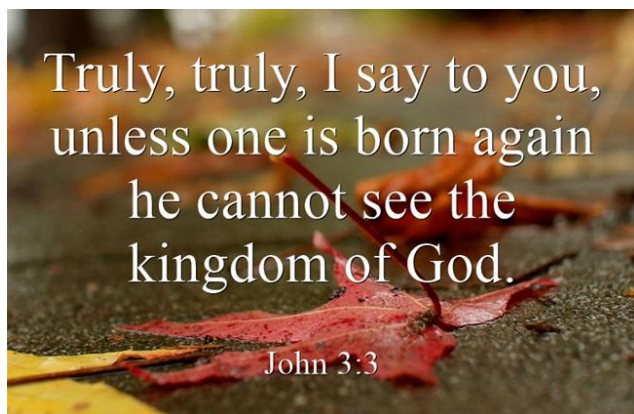
what Gandhiji or the freedom fighters imagined. This year marked the 500th Anniversary of another turning point, a 'Liberation & Transformation' experience for the Christian Church, especially in the western church, as a whole. Martin Luther, a young priest and monk in Germany, challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church in very fundamental ways; he published ninety-five 'theses', his objections to the existing practices of the Church, in the year 1517. The Church at that time had not just moral authority, but also political power; the Pope was seen as the representative of God on earth, with a say in everything. All this changed in the years and decades that followed Luther's challenge. The Church could no longer get rich by selling certificates ('indulgences') of sins pardoned, in exchange for money. The Bible, which was available only in Latin once, is readable in any language today. Luther wrote hymns, the forerunner of much of the choral music we enjoy today. Luther's marriage to a former nun set a model for the practice of clergy being allowed to marry. And the schism in Roman Catholic Church gave rise to Lutherans in Germany, Anglicans in England, Calvinists in Switzerland and other parts of Europe, and the myriad Protestant denominations we come across today. The Eastern churches have also assimilated some of the liberating ideas that came from the west. Reformation reminds us that it is not just individuals or political institutions that need liberation and transformation; the Church as an institution may also need to go through the same process from time to time. There are many voices in the Mar Thoma Church, especially our youth, who are demanding changes to traditions that elders hold fast to; we ignore such demands at our

own peril. Martin Luther was excommunicated by Rome in 1521, four years after he published his 'theses'; but Rome could do nothing to prevent the truth of Luther's assertions from gaining ground across the world and yielding fruit, "some thirty, some sixty and some hundredfold."



Luther's Reformation also reminds us that transformation can be a long and painful process, taking two steps forward and one step back like the proverbial frog trying to climb out of a water well. In our times of instant messaging and non-stop breaking news, this truth is easy to forget. Consider Peter; he was Jesus' constant companion during the years Jesus went around preaching the good news. One would think a person who had the unparalleled privilege of being with Jesus for such a significant period of time, hearing His interpretations of the Jewish scriptures, listening to His wisdom and wit, watching how He behaved towards one and all, seeing the miracles He performed, would be sufficient to instil in Peter faith that is solid as a rock. But alas! Peter the rock floundered on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion, when challenged by an ordinary woman. One would have thought the resurrected Jesus opened Peter's eyes to all that he needs to know and understand. But the vision of the sheet with animals, which happened much later, shows he was

still not free of some of the prejudices of a traditional Jew. That, plain and simple, is human nature, be it the 1st Century AD or the 21st. We need to keep this truth in front of us before passing judgement on others, both Christian and non-Christian, on matters of the spirit. Many of us would have come across well-meaning Christians who confront people with the question “Have you been born again?” The way the question is put across, one gets the sense that they see all of life and people as black or white; either you are a good guy, or a baddie, as in movies. In a sermon I listened to many years ago, the preacher mentioned the same question and gave an answer that has stayed with me for more than two decades: “Yes, I am born again, and again, and again. . . ”



We start each day with a prayer that we do not fall into temptations that we be delivered from evil. If you are like me, you end the day asking forgiveness for the many trespasses of the day, and praying for God’s grace and blessing to be a better person the next day. Yes, I am born again the next day . . . and again. . . .

Transformations are not always dramatic and large-scale as Luther’s Reformation; more often, transformation happens quietly, unnoticed by the world, in everyday places like our homes and places of work. I

remember a few simple words my father said when I was a fairly young adult. “Relationships are easy to break,” he said, “but extremely difficult to heal once broken.” It was a time when someone in the family was being very disrespectful to my father, and I knew he was deeply upset by what was happening. I wanted to go and give the relative a piece of my mind, but my father stopped me, and planted a seed of transformation in my mind about people and relationships through those simple words. Ten years have passed since I lost my father, but his gentle words of wisdom have stayed with me to this day. Our simple words and actions may have consequences far beyond our imagination, liberating and transforming others, like the gentle flow of water polishing a rock over years. “For. . . I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. . . .” Said Jesus, in His description of Judgement Day, pointing out the importance, even *eternal* significance of everyday acts of liberating kindness.

So, dear fellow Christian, let us ‘get up’ and open ourselves to being transformed by God’s Grace, which surrounds us all the days of our lives!

More Than a Rock

David Brand*,

All Saints' Harrow Weald, North London



Not being a cleric I am in no position to preach to anybody, however if I can leave you with a challenging thought that lasts as long as it takes to reach the car park or the lych gate⁹ I shall be more than satisfied.

I would like you to imagine a beautiful sandy beach, possibly Fistral beach in Cornwall or Rhossili beach in Wales where the sea rolls in, breaks and sweeps up the beach. The kind of beach where children play dare and inevitably end up with wet shoes as reputedly the seventh wave is larger than its peers. You will probably notice that these waves throw up small pebbles onto the sand and then greedily suck them back into the sea as it recedes. It is by this action that the pebbles are ground flat by the abrasive action of the sand and sea and on a calm day holidaymakers amuse themselves by

⁹ A roofed gateway to a churchyard used originally as a resting place for a bier before burial. You can see one of these gates at All Saints' Harrow Weald.

skipping or bouncing them over calm water with a low trajectory throw.

I would like you to remember this image as we go back in time to the moment when Jesus proclaimed that Peter would be the rock on which his church would be built, anyone hearing this for the first time could be forgiven in thinking that surely this must be a mistake, Peter was definitely a leader in his fishing community, you get the impression of a big bluff man who tended to talk or act first and think later. We have examples of this in his attempt to walk on water; then losing his faith and sinking, of being told "Get behind me, Satan!" by Jesus, falling asleep in the garden of Gethsemane when specifically asked to stay awake and was most likely responsible for cutting off the ear belonging to the servant to the High Priest.

Although forewarned by Jesus he denied him three times during the night and also fled leaving him to die on the cross in the company of the three Marys and John. More a pebble than a rock, however if we were to judge Peter at this stage we would be reflecting on our own humanity by underestimating the power and wisdom of God, because three momentous events take place: the resurrection of Jesus, the presence of the Holy Spirit and later the appearance of Paul. Peter now shamed and forgiven becomes the natural leader of the disciples. He has been strengthened and inspired by the Holy Spirit but hardly a rock on which to build a Church and there is worse to come.

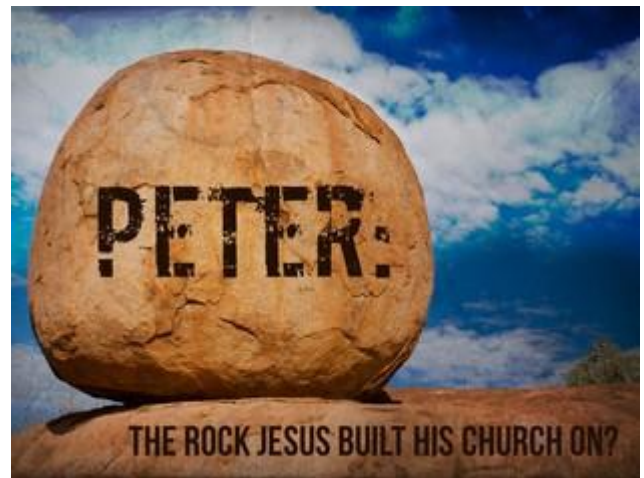
Israel over the centuries had been part of a huge battleground involving Egyptians, Persians, Assyrians, Romans, Medes,

Babylonians and Macedonians and as a consequence Jerusalem became a multinational city and its very existence depended on the diplomatic skills of Herod the Great. When he was succeeded by Herod Antipas Jerusalem learned dearly the cost of poor statesmanship when the Romans finally lost patience with acts of rebellion and destroyed the city in AD70 and this would not be the only time in its history. In order to retain their identity in this multinational society the Jews kept very much to themselves by applying their strict mosaic laws to keep out foreigners whom they called Gentiles.

As a consequence the Jews insisted that anybody wanting to join this new Christian Church comprising mainly of Jews had to become Jewish and this meant being circumcised. This policy suited the Pharisees as they hoped to bury this new religion inside the Jewish faith as just another sect and hopefully gradually erase it. Paul was committed to keeping the door open to all those wishing to join this fledgling Christian Church and initially Peter welcomed the Gentiles, he would socialise and even eat with them. However under pressure from the judaising group he changed his mind and refused to eat with the Gentiles on the grounds that he would endanger his position with the Jerusalem Church.

Before the Council of Jerusalem in AD 48/50 Paul had stood up in the presence of the entire church and openly criticised him for his inconsistency by pointing out to him that if he was willing to eat with the Gentiles, why should he compel them to become Jews? So here we have Peter feeling like that small stone being rolled up the beach by Paul and dragged back into the sea

by the Judeans. However Paul's comments like that large seventh wave pushed the small stone so far up the beach no wave could ever drag it back again and at the AD 48/50 Council of Jerusalem Peter accepted the Council's vote that Gentiles should be exempt from all requirements of Jewish Law except for those applying to their immoral practises or upon comity with the Jewish believers.



At this point, as Jesus had ordained that small stone became Peter the Rock and that decision made by Peter is the reason why we are here today in this church.

That now leaves the sand from the beach. Peter may be a rock but it has to be as Jesus pointed out on a solid foundation and you are that sand, when mixed with faith, love and devotion becomes a permanent foundation for our church that will ensure its continued survival to be handed down to others for centuries to come. Thank you for listening to me.

** David Brand is an elder and a Lay Reader of the All Saints' Harrow Weald where Sinai MTC conducts worship services. He is a retired electronic engineer. This is a sermon given at the early morning Sunday Eucharist.*

Self – Transformation and Communion

Fr. Thomas Punnapadam, SDB, Bangalore

The story is told of a young doctor who was assigned to a ward for mental patients. He was totally committed to the care of patients and spared no efforts to assist them. One day one of them confessed that they too really loved him. When asked the reason they chorused: you are just like one of us.

On the 500th anniversary of the ninety-five theses that sparked off the so-called reformation among the followers of Christ and the consequent birth of the protestant churches, all Christians are challenged to take another step on the path of Christian unity for which Jesus Christ prayed at the Last Supper: *Holy Father, keep in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one* (Jn 17/11b; also v 22). Martin Luther sought a reformation of the church, an honest and fraternal academic disputation on the theses on indulgences and not a division among the followers of Jesus Christ.

The council of Trent was indeed reformatory and brought in many changes in Roman Catholic theology following Luther's line of thought. It was probably the prevalent circumstances of mutual hostility and antagonism that brought about a definitive division. This spirit of hostility prevailed until a few decades ago. The year 2017 marks the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the comprehensive dialogue between churches, particularly Roman Catholics and Lutherans. The clarion call to lay aside prejudice and mistrust must be heeded to not only by church authorities and

acclaimed theological thinkers, but by every authentic follower of Jesus Christ. As Pope John XXIII reminded us decades ago, the things that unite us are greater than those that divide us. And as a joint declaration of Lutherans and Catholics acknowledges, Martin Luther is a witness to Jesus Christ.

The unity envisioned by Christ is essentially a unity of mind and heart and soul, a unity patterned on, and nourished by the unity of the Father and the Son. This unity is far more an inner reality than an external one, it is a unity of hearts rather than of minds. It is a journey toward communion springing from the premise that there is far more that already unites us than what differentiates the followers of Jesus Christ. This awareness is not primarily an intellectual one as an emotional one, an individual and personal one rather than an institutional one. One can be graced with this enlightenment only to the extent one undertakes the personal inward journey of self-transformation.

FAITH
*is not believing that God can
it is knowing that He will.*

It is beyond doubt that it is faith that justifies, just as our father Abraham was justified because he believed (Rom 4/3). Genuine and profound faith is not intellectual assent to a set of dogmatic pronouncements; nor is it a human achievement. It is becoming ever more deeply of the existential reality of the human person in relation to God and leading to unconditional trust in God.

Salvation is never a reward for moral behaviour and performance of rituals.

As Luther reminded us, the primacy of grace, cannot be diluted. Religion primarily is not a system of beliefs but a way of life, which primarily creates an attitude of repentance, an acknowledgement that one needs to change. The very first demand of Jesus is, *the time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel* (Mk 1/15). It is noteworthy that in the first of his ninety-five theses Martin Luther emphasises this: “When Our Lord and master, Jesus Christ said *Repent*, he called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance”. So the supreme criterion of authentic Christian life is the humble acknowledgement that repentance and conversion are absolute necessities not just at the beginning of one’s faith journey but every moment of one’s life.

A little reflection brings home to us that today in the world at large, including the religious domain, there is so much attention directed to the external, tangible doctrinal level and not sufficient attention to the psychological and spiritual domain. It is often forgotten that our external behaviours and actions are immensely coloured by our mind set, often so very prejudiced, judgemental, and negative. So unless there is deep inner personal transformation in individuals, no change in externals can even be dreamt of.

In the field of Christian ecumenism, it would not be an exaggeration to aver that often there is an unconscious Pharisaism in many of us. Each one of us individually and collectively lives on the premise that we are right and the others are wrong. More than genuine dialogue each one hopes for a

conversion of the other. Unless each one is open to the need for change in oneself, there



can be no genuine dialogue. Often the prejudice, superiority complex and even Pharisaism may be unconscious or too deep seated to be noticed. As a Roman Catholic I am aware that we use the term ‘separated brethren’ to refer to other Christian denominations. The pharisaic presumptions in the term are too evident to be ignored.

We are ever more anxious about the pollution of our environment, which will eventually destroy the earth. We are commendably conscious about cleanliness of the body, necessary and praiseworthy no doubt. Nevertheless, unless the mind and soul are purified, no one can ever hope to fully purify words and actions, behaviours and institutions. Jesus himself warns us that, *not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man. . . But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this*

defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man (Mt 15/11, 18-20a).

Mahatma Gandhi, the mystic politician and honoured as the Father of the nation, is rightly acknowledged as one of the greatest leaders in obtaining political independence for India. Unfortunately, his profound warning is far too often forgotten. He often reiterated that when the British rulers leave India Indians would win *swathantra* not *swaraj*. Political freedom and democratic governance is to be clearly distinguished from the inner freedom of all that binds us from within, genuine self-rule, liberation from all that binds us within.

The core of religion is not a set of intellectual concepts or formulations of dogma, but a basic attitude of profound devotion to the divine and a consequent/resultant feeling of ineffable oneness with all human beings in and through the Supreme Being. Religious truth is not primarily theoretical in nature, pertaining to intellectual assent but a lived, noble truth that transforms one's life and societal structures. Rather than focus on theoretical formulation of religious truths, we are invited to focus on channelling all these resources to fight the common enemies of all religions like faith-crisis, value-crisis, secularism, fundamentalism and consumerism. The authenticity of religion is evidenced by the depth of individual daily self-transformation one experiences and manifests in one's life-style. As wells and lakes, streams and rivers all contain water, so do all believers possess some dimension of ultimate truth,

For Jesus of the Gospels, the greatest sin is pharisaism. One of his strongest warnings is: *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves (Mt 23/ 13,13).*



The primary focus of change and transformation is inevitable one's own individual self and the community one joyfully belongs to. It cannot be denied that often there is a holier-than-thou attitude in us individually and collectively. If each one of us, as also our communities, makes a daily, honest, persevering effort to be more and more Christ-like, there will be far greater unity among all the followers of Christ. As the common sense knowledge assures us the closer one is to the centre, the closer one is to the other. So the only way, the surest way, the quickest way, to come closer to one another is to come closer to Christ, become Christ-like through inner self-liberating freedom from all prejudices

and rash judgements about the other individuals and communities. As Pope Francis has enlightened us in his well-known Apostolic Exhortation, *Joy of the Gospel*, the Church does not grow by proselytising but by attracting new members.

The profound purpose of genuine dialogue is not to change the others but simply to encounter the other to know and love the other. In a genuine encounter, difference is recognised as a gift, not resisted as a threat. Authentic and fruitful dialogue implies facing the challenges of truth in genuine love. *Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ* (Eph 4/15).

This is the challenge of truth to humbly acknowledge that none of us possesses the truth in its fullness. The commitment to truth, *satyagraha*, is a life-long commitment. The desire for truth is inseparable from non-violence, absolute refusal to do any harm to another. Truth never precludes the very same love for oneself and for the other. This is precisely the virtue of charity which accords genuine respect for a different formulation of truth and befriending others as co-pilgrims in the universal search for ultimate truth and cooperating with them as partners in building up the Reign of God. This is undoubtedly a constructive and proactive process. Divinity is diverse, but division is diabolical.

Satya in Indian spiritual understanding is not an impersonal dogmatic formula but the ultimate ground of existence, God, I-am-who-am. From this perspective there is a spark of *satya* in everyone and hence

everyone deserves this basic recognition and profound respect. The core of human dignity is religious, in so far as every human being is bound to seek the truth and live by it. This sincere search is the greatest source of transformation and liberation. The sure path to transformation is first of all the liberation from all one's presumptions and prejudices.



This life-long attitude of sincere search is the most powerful safeguard against evils of intolerance, hostility, fear, suspicion or indifference to those who perceive truth differently from us. No individual or community can claim to realize this absolute truth, since the grasp or perspective of ultimate truth is always time-bound, space-constrained and culture-restricted. Every individual and group is a votary of God totally committed to seeking the absolute truth ever more profoundly. One lives in the awareness that the best way to change the other is to transform oneself.

The *Khristbhakta* movement is indeed a bright star on the horizon of Indian Spirituality today. Born in Varanasi, a pilgrimage centre of Hindus, this movement attracts more and more followers in the name of Christ the Sadguru (universal teacher) and unites them in genuine fellowship not only for worship but also for harmonious, non-discriminatory living. The

union of hearts is emphasized more than a consensus of ideas and dogmas; 'belonging rather than believing' is the vision of this community. Everyone is a seeker who accepts Yesubhagavan (Jesus Lord) as their absolute inspiration.

It is essentially a religio-cultural movement that empowers and inspires people in their struggle against oppression and discrimination in society. Many seekers proclaim boldly the inner transformation they have experienced. To all Christians this movement offers great hope. It is a new way of being Christian, not so much belonging to a religion as living by the Gospel. It is a break-through in dialogical mission.

Unconditional L*O*V*E

Khristbhakta movement is indeed an inspiring contemporary model of dialogue, achieved not merely as an academic exercise but as a living example. The supreme goal is to know Christ as God's universal love and the source of all grace; profound awareness that we are children of one Father urges us to live in ever greater understanding of one another; all come to know one another, share what they have and be equally open to

learn from one another. These *Khristbhaktas* prove by their lives that the heart of liberation is the liberation of the heart. When hearts come closer to one another, minds cannot remain distant.

In the joint statement of Pope Francis and Bishop Younan, President of the Lutheran World Federation, on the occasion of 500th anniversary, they affirm, that we are freed by grace to move towards the communion to which God continually calls us. Indeed it is grace that frees us, liberates us. It acknowledges that both Lutherans and Catholics have wounded the visible unity of the Church that theological differences were accompanied by prejudice and conflict, that religion was instrumentalised for political ends. Our common faith in Jesus and our baptism demands a daily conversion. Everyone is invited to pray for the healing of all wounds and listen to God's call, to set aside all conflict and enter into ever-deeper communion. Witnessing together to the Gospel of Christ means to stand together in service; to welcome strangers, defend the rights of the weak and oppressed; to pray for a change of heart and mind that leads from mental conflict to communion of hearts.

May we never forget that the way we relate to one another shapes our witness to the Gospel. Jesus prayed to the Father that *they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe thou hast sent me* (Jn 17/21). Living Christ's love in relationships, we open ourselves to the power of God's love which will affect the cosmic and human transformation assured us by God. *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. Behold the dwelling of God is with men . . . Behold I make all things new* (Rev 21/ 1, 3; 5b).

Everyone is invited to begin from a perspective of unity not from division and strengthen what is held in common even though differences are more easily seen and experienced. So, one lets oneself be continuously be transformed by the encounter with the other and commits oneself to seek visible unity by rediscovering the Gospel of Jesus Christ for our times and witnessing together to the mercy of God in the world. This genuine encounter in utter openness is the ultimate service to truth we are called to render. This service is impossible without deep love in one's heart.



In concrete, this love implies desire to alleviate suffering in every form, to break all walls of separation and discrimination, True liberation is achieved by being the change one wants to see in the world . This is the unique contribution of each one of us to the building up of the reign of God.

Ministering to the transgender persons

Rt. Rev. Dr. Geevarghese Mar Theodosius Episcopa & Rev. Dr. M. J. Joseph, Kottayam [It is indeed proper that the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church has initiated a project to honour the Birth Centenary of The Most Revd Dr. Philipose Mar Chrysostom Valiya Metropolitan by establishing a Rehabilitation Centre for the welfare of the Transgender persons. The Metropolitan of the Church, The Most Revd Dr. Joseph Mar Thoma, is giving leadership, and he is assisted by the Diocesan Episcopa, Rt. Rev. Dr. Geevarghese Mar Theodosius, and the office bearers of the Church. It is commendable that during the first year itself (2017-2018), the Church has budgeted Rupees One Crore to be raised and spent for this project to catch its momentum in a phased manner.]

In this brief article, an attempt is made to look at the problems and the possibilities of the Transgender from a theological perspective. The term, transgender is an umbrella term. It may include people who are not exclusively masculine or feminine (people who are gender queer .e.g. bi-gender, pangender, or agender). Their gender identity is different from the sex assigned to them at birth. The word and its modern definition came into use only in the late 20th century, although people who would fit under this definition have existed in every culture irrespective of their religious affiliation throughout the recorded history. The transgender community is incredibly diverse Owing to the social stigma associated with their identity, they face a unique set of challenges such as

discrimination, unemployment, lack of educational facilities, homelessness, lack of medical care and umpteen problems associated with marriage and adoption. In 1994, transgender were given voting rights in India, but ironically the task of issuing them voter identity cards required them to declare their gender. The group is often deprived of inheritance and property rights. Many of them feel that they are marginalized and end up in begging and sex work for their survival. Even though they too enjoy the Fundamental rights of the Indian Constitution articles 14,15,21 and 23, they are not effectively implemented. However we believe that the constitutional provision will not alone provide security to them. The spirituality of the people at different levels must be strengthened. It is indeed heartening to note that the recently started Metro Service in Cochin have given jobs for a few of them with regular salary and other basic human protection.



As Church is called upon to minister to the weak and the powerless, it is quite legitimate for the Church to become “the voice of the voiceless” (Uppsala-1968) so as to break *the conspiracy of silence* in the society. The faithful has to remember again and again that “Life through Death” must happen in history for the establishment of just peace. As the Bussan Assembly of the

WCC (2013), affirms, the *kairos of the Church* has come before us to affirm life for all in a pilgrimage towards justice and peace. This is the call of the Spirit to cross religious and social boundaries in search of “mature manhood in Christ”. The transgender project of the Mar Thoma Church is a pioneering effort with spiritual and social goals. It is nothing but rekindling the divine truth bequeathed to the Church. The initiative is to discover new area of mission by focusing on mission possibilities in the truth of Christ. It is pertinent that we need to heed to the words of Marcus Barth: “whoever considers those table companions of Jesus too bad, too base, too little and too far removed from salvation, does not know Jesus as he really is The Being of the Church in the world enables her ‘to go’, ‘to teach’ and ‘to heal’ as “the conscience of the human community”(Vatican II). There are several daunting challenges and hopes in each era of Christian mission.

God who acts in history

The incarnation of Jesus is to be understood as the involvement of God in human affairs. The Holy Bible particularly the Exodus Story speaks of God’s act of redemption in the world particularly through the story of Israelites. This is a Christian paradigm. The Christian understanding of God is one that tells us the story of redemption of the suffering humanity for a better future. In an act of liberation, there are three component elements to be recognized: God, people and the leader. In Exodus 3:7&8 we read: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out... and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them...” The three verbs, “seen”, “heard” and “rescue” are

worth considering as they speak of the compassion of the Lord for redemption and restoration. This means that God has a concern for the transformation and liberation of the “least,” the last” and “the lost”. As Church is the Eucharistic presence of the Kingdom of God in history, there is a tremendous responsibility before the Church to continue the reconciling act of God in Christ. It must happen through the ministry of the word (logos) and the ministry of service (*diakonia*) of reconciliation (2 Cor.5: 18-21.). Mission is thus understood as participation in the reconciling ministry of Jesus. As co-workers with God” (1Cor.3: 9) it carries a sense of urgency and dignity. The prophetic and the pastoral role in Christian ministry is a call to humankind to realize the Plan of Salvation in Jesus Christ. The challenge is to build the city of God brick by brick as the eternal presence of the divine. The divine urge before us is to move in the Spirit of God pursuing hope for justice and peace. The biblical phrase “justification by faith” is to be understood as God’s acceptance of us as we are. In the story of the Samaritan woman and the encounter of Jesus with Zacchaeus in the Gospels are indeed truths for us to move in the right direction towards “life in all its fullness” for others. “The other” is no longer outside the Church. But the ones who have been marginalized and branded as “useless”. As Jesus suffered “outside the city gate “(Heb.13: 12), every possible effort is to be made to meet him outside the camp bearing abuse for him (Heb.13: 13).

Mission in the Truth of Christ

God’s gift of New Humanity in Christ is not the gift of the Church to the people of other faiths and ideologies. It is the manifestation of divine solidarity on earth. The Kingdom

in our midst creates a new consciousness and a new style of action for the transformation of the world. The thread that passes through all the religions of the world is nothing but the thread of *agape* revealed in Christ on the cross. The mission of the Church is to strive with God for the fulfillment of the prayer that Jesus taught us: “Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”. (St. Mat. 6: 10).The prayer has ecumenical and ecological dimensions. What happens on earth creates joy in heaven (Lk. 15: 10).The reference to God “as our Father” is an inclusive umbrella for us to search for the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of humanity. In our care for the Transgender, there is no element of discrimination as human need is our sole aim. Our care for others is the measure of our greatness. To touch the bleeding points we need to have sensitiveness and compassion.



As St.Paul puts it in Gal.3:28, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female” in our affirmation of the new humanity in Christ. For this, we need to seek the meaning of Grace over Law for the affirmation of human rights and gender justice. For the establishment of an inclusive society, *the Oikoumene of domination* must give way to *the Oikoumene of solidarity*. The vision of the Gospel as rooted in the Kingdom of God and manifested in the

death and resurrection of Jesus Christ urges us to stand against marginality and to seek for a movement from *charity to justice*. The parable of the labourers in the vineyard (St.Mat.20:1-16) is a classic example to illustrate it. The Church is called upon to translate the Jubilee vision in the Nazareth Sermon of Jesus (Lk.4:18-22) into social realities. In the Magnificat (Lk.1:51-54), the great redemptive power of God manifests itself for the sake of “*the sinned against*”. “*The scattering of the proud*” (Lk.1:52) is a process in social leveling. God is at work in history to set right what has gone wrong in the human community (cf.Ps.146: 8).

In Mark 2: 16-17, the opponents of Jesus levelled a criticism against Jesus: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but the sinners”. Mission in the truth of Christ is a radical search for the defenceless and the unrecognized. It has been well said, that “a great city is one that handles its garbage and art equally well”. The measure of the presence of the Kingdom in our midst is the measure of our caring for the least. It only facilitates the falling of the dews of Hermon on the mountain of Zion (Ps. 133). The Church is called upon to create “refreshing spots “in the world. The initiative of the Mar Thoma Church in this said area of ministering to the Transgender persons is only a sign of pilgrimage to the mature manhood in Christ.

Mission and gender justice

Gender justice is basically an issue of human rights. It is a search for human equality. Every human right is to be achieved through

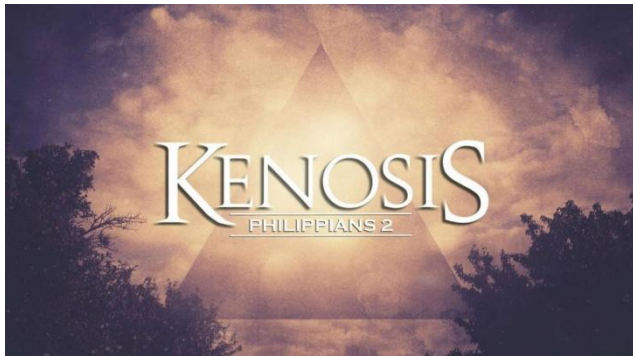
a constant struggle against the forces of Death. “In an age of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary action (George Orwell).

The Church is called upon to say that its primary concern is *to protest and protect* others by following the Good shepherd, Jesus. Jesus said: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn.10: 10).As “Christian Faith is “a resistance movement against fatalism” (Faith and Order Commission Meeting, Bangalore-1978), the mission of the Church is to search for new and radical mission paradigms. In such an effort, the Church has to present Christ as “the Yes” of God (2Cor.1: 19). If Jesus Christ is “the Yes of God”, we need to raise legitimate questions concerning human identity and dignity. It is worth noting that the Catholic bishops at their synod in Rome in October 2015 took an unprecedented step to “welcome” LGBT and noted that they too have “gifts and qualities” to offer the Church. In Rom.15: 7 St. Paul writes: “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God.” Pope Francis has changed the entrenched attitudes of the Church on many issues by opening the doors for further discussion. The humble attempt of the Mar Thoma Church in the area of Transgender rehabilitation will create a few ripples for the formation of new humanity in our wider community. To find a provision in the parish budget of the Mar Thoma Church is also a positive step towards our commitment to a just cause. “To be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness” (Bertrand Russell). To offer quality of life for others, we need to cultivate the habit of caring for others’ welfare. Remember, “Anyone who is among the

living has hoped. . . (Eccl.9:4).The Church has to give heed to the words of Pope Benedict the XVI: “In so many of our societies, side by side with material prosperity, a spiritual desert is spreading, an interior emptiness, an unarmed fear and quiet sense of despair.” In the name of Christ, the Faithful has to stand for a reversal motif as we find in the song of Mary.

Conclusion

The members of the Church should empty themselves following the **kenosis**



of Christ. It is the only medium to carry God’s amazing grace in word and deed. As the Aroma of Christ for the empowerment of the community, there is always a MISSION MANDATE for the Church. To search for the human face of God in Jesus Christ is indeed the message of the Kingdom. “God in your grace, transform the world” (WCC- theme Brazil) be the prayer on our lips. This is a call to move from a religion based on creed, code and cult to a religion of spirituality. What is needed today is to seek a secular (religionless) dimension of spirituality. The church should affirm with one voice that the Transgender community has a role to play in enriching the vision of the Church and of the community at large.

“O Son of man wills these bones live” (Ezekiel). “Yes, Lord”.

500th Anniversary of the Reformation

Revd Dr. David Cornick

[Revd Dr. David Cornick, the secretary of the Churches Together in England (CTE), reflects on the service at the Westminster Abbey to mark the 500th anniversary of the 95 theses and the start of the Reformation.]



Whether or not Martin Luther actually nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg on October 31st, 1517 is doubtful. What he definitely did do was post a copy of them to his diocesan bishop on that day. What followed led to what we now call ‘the Reformation’ although it would be more accurate to talk of many reformations, some of which produced what later came to be called ‘Protestantism’ and others the reform of the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, the 500th anniversary of that day needed to be marked.

It is a particularly significant anniversary for our friends in the Lutheran Churches, and it was right that the Council of Lutheran Churches should take the lead, in partnership with Westminster Abbey, in offering a service to mark the day. They did so with open hearted generosity to ecumenical guests who filled the Abbey alongside them. CTE’s Presidents processed, the Archbishop of Canterbury preached and Cardinal Nichols offered prayer.

It was a thoroughly Lutheran occasion, marked in particular by the rich tradition of Lutheran music. The Abbey choir of women and men let Bach's Lobet den Herrn open a door into the joy of Lutheran spirituality (Bach is surely one of Lutheranism's greatest gifts to the world!) and their joyous voices rang around the vaulted arches. But two contemporary pieces commissioned by the Lutheran Council of Great Britain were glorious complements – The Answered Hymn by Barbara Höfling which allows at least five of the different languages used within the Lutheran Council to counterpoint each other in praise, and Bent Sørensen's immersive setting of John 17:23 I in them and you in me. Victor Gollancz once said that music ought to be one of the proofs of God's existence! Had he heard the choirs gathered for this service and the music they sang he might have considered his hypothesis proved?

In his sermon Archbishop Justin reminded us that the reformation recalled the church to the reality that (in the words of the BCP Collect for Trinity 19) '...without thee we are not able to please thee', and he addressed the ambiguities of the heritage of the Reformation. On the one hand the renewal of the gospel and the gift of the Scriptures, on the other war, destruction and division. But the gospel speaks profoundly to every age, and in our day the gospel, so powerfully renewed in the Reformation, speaks to the inequalities of our day – refugees and human trafficking, human arrogance and materialism. Will we let the gospel transform us as those caught up in the reformations of the sixteenth century allowed themselves to be changed?

That in turn introduced a significant moment in the quest for Christian unity. The Anglican Communion has affirmed the substance of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (signed in 1999 by the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity). It had also been previously signed by the World Methodist Council and the World Communion of Reformed Churches. The Archbishop presented copies of the Anglican affirmation to the Revd Dr Martin Junge, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, and the Most Revd Brian Farrell, Secretary of the Pontifical Council, in the presence of Methodist and Reformed representatives. It symbolised the healing of those cruel divisions of the sixteenth century.

In the afternoon about 300 people attended a seminar in St Margaret's Church, which is part of the Abbey. Professors Alexandra Walsham and Eamon Duffy from Cambridge, David Crankshaw from King's College, London and Robert Stern from Sheffield, along with The Rt. Revd Martin Lind, the Lutheran Bishop in Great Britain, explored Luther's influence on English church history and European philosophy and theology. It was a salutary reminder of how the world can be changed by one person's concern for the integrity of the gospel, and as such a challenge to us all. The Lutheran community in this country is small, although it is of course a major world communion. This anniversary reminds us of how impoverished we would be without Lutheran spirituality, and how much we could be enriched by fellowship and dialogue with our Lutheran friends.

**MERRY CHRISTMAS
&
HAPPY NEW YEAR**

**May this Christmas be bright and
cheerful and may the New Year
begin on a prosperous note!**

