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Social Action and Communicating Christ

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I hesitated to reprint this article, knowing that many of our evangelical constituency will reject it as being 'liberal', despite the evangelical heritage of its author. Its ethos and methodology is in stark contrast to the preceding article by David Hesselgrave. I think it is a very significant article on the issue of the relationship of evangelism to social justice and deserves careful reading and theological analysis. It is important because it gives an authentic and penetrating insight into the sufferings and oppressions of ordinary village people who, for generations, have lived in bondage and suffered injustice. It reflects the dark side of the powerless villagers, not only in India but across Asia. These insights are the costly fruits of living an incarnate life for an extended period of time, in a community in the grip of bondage to satanic power. The itinerant evangelist, who comes into the village to hold an evangelistic meeting, complete with jeep, flannelgraph and film projector, may never experience the pain of such human degradation and sin. In story after story, the author shows that sin and evil are not just a personal and private matter but are communal, involving social customs and structures. To preach a purely individualistic gospel, on the assumption that once people are converted, the social evils of the community will slowly go away, is just not true. But it can happen when the church is formed as a redeemed fellowship and through word and deed confesses Christ as Saviour and Lord. Unfortunately the article does not state whether or not the long term goal of the so called 'secular' approach to justice, is the establishing of a church as salt and light in the world. Human solidarity for justice is not enough and I think our author would agree. Further, this article is important because it shows that a non-confrontational and living dialogical approach to people does, in fact, lead people to accept Christ as Saviour and Lord. Confrontational evangelistic preaching may be effective in an urbanized secularized society or where the church is well established, but in rural Asia where the name of Christ is not known, a more typically Asian approach to communication may be more effective. As we reflect on the lifestyle and message of our p. 234 Lord and Paul's approach to a purely pagan people, it is clearly not 'either/or' but 'both/and'. To preach sin and guilt to people who inherit a culture of shame calls for a special understanding of both the gospel and the context. The article is also significant because the author and his students were willing to accept a status of powerlessness and nonviolence, refusing money or using their superior education as instruments of power. They were able to point inquirers to the power of Christ lifted up on the cross and risen from the dead. My disappointment with the article lies in the fact that the author does not give us enough clues on how to bridge the gap between proclamation and justice, between justification by faith and justice in society and the boundaries between an incarnate Christ-centred life style and syncretistic practices which deny the uniqueness of the gospel. Perhaps the answer will be

found, not in the classroom and the library, but in the living Church, incarnate in the world but not of it.

Readers of these two articles are invited to respond to them and to the issues involved in the apparent gulf between them.

Editor

The Rural Theological Institute (hereafter RTI) of the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary was established eight years ago in November, 1979. Its programme was chartered with the specific aim of getting involved in the surrounding poverty stricken villages to work in and along with the people for the eradication of poverty. This programme was to provide opportunities for practical involvement and theological reflection for the Seminary students.

The moment we decided that we had to work in and along with the poor, enlisting their active participation, we had to face the question of the role of faith. We were a Christian institution existing for the purpose of training its full time workers. The village people, however, were mostly Hindus. Except for the three small congregations among thirty villages chosen for our involvement the entire population were Hindus. Two major questions and some related issues had to be faced. First, if we said matters of faith did not matter would we be doing justice to our commitment to the gospel? Could the training given to pastoral candidates under such an attitude of total secularity be proper? Second, what would we do when we came across hurdles for development based on religious values and sentiments such as the entrenched caste system, the subordination of women to men and the general acceptance of poverty and adversity as destined by Karma, all p. 235 such sentiments being strongly undergirded by Hinduism? Would we challenge such values or values or leave them untouched for fear of offending religious sentiments?

By the time the RTI was established, its parent institution, the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, had learnt several lessons. First of all that we are to be motivators and supporters of peoples' movements for justice and development rather than to assume the role of agents of development channelling funds. This was a hard learnt lesson, because in its initial phase of enthusiasm for involvement our pattern of involvement had been project-oriented. A lot of money was pumped in as loans. It was when we threw in our lot and stood shoulder to shoulder with the slum dwellers in their fight to secure squatting rights that we first experienced real solidarity and the latent potential within the people came out. Therefore, it was clear from the outset that in the RTI too our major role was to be one of motivating and enabling.

Given such an orientation it was imperative that we did nothing to upset enlisting the full co-operation of the oppressed. Giving priority to the question of faith affiliation was bound to create suspicion against us and division among the people themselves. Therefore, the option to be totally secular was a predecided option. The fact that we were a Christian institution motivated by the love of Christ, however, could not be hid under a bushel. We were naturally inclined to provide pastoral care for the three Christian congregations. Then as an institution of training young pastors we had prayers and services of worship at the farm where the Institute was housed. Therefore, while we had clearly decided to be secular in our work of organizing the poor in concerns of justice to fight the forces that kept them poor, our Christian commitment and our religious expressions of that commitment could not be kept a secret. Nor did we try to. This openness made it necessary for us to explain very clearly why we were there and how we were going to work with a majority of people who did not share our faith. Our introduction went something like this:

We are Christians. We have come to get involved in your problems mainly because of Christ's constraining love. We have understood God and his purpose for the whole of humanity only through Jesus Christ. However, the pursuit of justice for all is a common purpose that binds us together. Therefore we shall not make faith affiliation an issue in that common pursuit for justice.

Such a stance naturally helped to build up rapport and we began to be involved through a number of local struggles, identifying ourselves fully and being prepared to court arrest and become targets of slander [p. 236](#) and even physical assault at times by the powers, whose authority began to shake under the impact of the gathering momentum. Such willingness and readiness to suffer in an alongside the people created a great sense of solidarity. This growing solidarity was further strengthened when it also became obvious to them that we did not treat the Christian congregations in any way preferentially and when we were not in the least enamoured by some who expressed their option to become Christians if we would channel special aid to them. Further, we abstained obstinately from distributing tracts and indulging in open air preaching in spite of repeated pressures from the Madurai Christians and even at times from within the Seminary.

While on the one hand we rejoiced greatly at the growing solidarity with the poor and because the people motivated and enabled by us had won several struggles, from time to time the question whether we had become another secular social movement did haunt us from within. Where was the specific Christian content in this involvement and how did this help the young pastors to grow in theological understanding and in their commitment to mission?

We were to learn gradually that such a guilt complex was totally uncalled for. For on the one hand we were able to discover how close their understanding of God was to ours and on the other hand how a communication about Christ was indeed taking place. We were led into true dialogue.

First of all, then, let me outline what we learnt about the understanding of God that existed among the poor villagers who are all Hindus:

GOD IS ONE AND FORMLESS

In one of the villages called Ramankulam they worship a deity called Kanilyalan (The Lord of the Land). At the very entrance to the village underneath a huge peepul tree, stands a stone pillar. On it is carved no image. They anoint this stone pillar with oil and offer puja. The village people could give no account of the myth or legend which gave rise to this cult. However, on one occasion one of the members of this village came to the Institute and during the course of the conversation on several things he said how happy they were because they were blessed with rain that year. He then went on to say that their village people thought that it was due to our (the Institute's) *punga* (merit) that they got the rain. Although flattered by that remark I felt constrained to say that it was not due to any special merit on our part. This remark evoked an off-the-cuff and irrelevant remark. The villager went on to say, 'yes, [P. 237](#) yes, of course you think that we worship idols. But do you know why we have placed that stone pillar at the entrance and call it Kanilyalan? It is because we are not theologians like you folk to be thinking about God all the time. We tend to forget God who is indeed everywhere and who is formless. We need to be reminded that he is very much present right among us. That is all. God is only one. He is everywhere but people like us need reminders. We only worship that One God ...'. One might be tempted to think that this was a defensive apology. But not so, we have clear

proof to believe that he was being very honest and sincere. The following two episodes prove that.

GOD'S SPECIAL PRESENCE WHEN PEOPLE GATHER TO DISPENSE JUSTICE

In that very same village once I had been invited to chair a village Panchayat (people's court). A young man in a moment of emotional outburst had attacked an old man and an elderly woman and had caused physical hurt. He realized his fault and was ready to make amends.

The court was called to decide the nature of punishment. The court's decision was that he should prostrate three times and openly apologize in addition to paying a fine to be given as compensation to the two persons who had been hurt. Sitting as the Chairman I became acutely embarrassed when the young man got ready to prostrate himself before me. So I tried to stop him and asked him to go to the temple and seek God's forgiveness. Quickly came the retort from the people, 'No! No! He should do it only here for this is God's assembly. God is wherever we are gathered to render justice. He need not go to the temple. Don't be embarrassed, he is prostrating himself only before God.'

This understanding is fairly widespread and by no means limited to this particular village. On another occasion when there was a village trial the culprit didn't own up to the charges levelled against him. He was guilty. Someone suggested that he should be made to take an oath in a temple of a fierce goddess. Once again there was a chorus of protests from among the members of the Panchayat (the court). They said, 'This is God's assembly and if he dares to defy this assembly then God would punish him. There is no need to make him swear before any particular deity.'

GOD HAS NO BIAS TOWARDS HIS DEVOTEES IN MATTERS OF JUSTICE

On another occasion when we were spending a lot of time discussing and planning for an action against a local tyrant suddenly a quarrel **P. 238** broke out in another corner. One man who had great big marks on his forehead (a sign to indicate that he had just been to a temple for worship) had come into the village quite drunk and had provoked a quarrel. Immediately, one of the village elders told him that he could not expect to escape because he wore signs of his piety on his forehead. He then went on to tell a mythical story. The God Vishnu was one day reposing on the lap of his wife Lakshmi. Suddenly he got up, ran madly and just as quickly came back to his repose. His wife Lakshmi was perplexed. She pestered him to explain his sudden run and immediate return. Lord Vishnu then told her with some 'reluctance' the reason for his action.

One of my devotees cried out to me for help so I rushed. But I came back without helping him because he had presumed too much. He had trodden on washed clothes spread on the ground and dirtied them. When the washerman saw his work spoiled he scolded my devotee. My devotee instead of apologizing beat up the washerman. When the washerman retaliated in anger and beat him back he cried out to me for help. As soon as the cry was heard I rushed to help but when I learnt that it was my devotee who was really in the wrong I returned without helping him!

Telling this story the elder warned the pious man not to indulge in mischief presuming upon God's succour because he regularly and meticulously participated in worship.

After listening to this story I asked the elder to explain why the Lord Vishnu was reluctant to tell this to his wife at first. 'Oh!' he said, 'that is because the Lord was afraid

that his wife would then think badly about all his devotees.’ Surely, the elder had some profound understanding about God although he had come to this perception through a myth.

Once we realize that God’s truth, love and justice have not gone unheeded in spite of a prevailing culture which legitimizes injustice and falsehood, what is needed is a deliberate attempt to identify genuine perceptions of truth, love and justice and accord maximum recognition. The next task is to make it possible for the people to develop discernment between myths and legends which promote just values and those which promote unjust values. Even then one could not assume that once they develop this discernment adherence to these values follows on automatically. As such an adherence would demand a great deal in terms of a changed life style and change in culture we cannot see any immediate results. However, once a discernment becomes the general discernment of the majority, possibilities for changes in culture as a whole would become greater.

Is this enough? Is there no specific need then to communicate Christ and call for an open confessional allegiance to Jesus Christ the Lord in [p. 239](#) and through whom world history is to find its consummation? This question can be answered only within the context of Christian experience, that is to say that for Christians it is an imperative. Not in the sense, however, as is often misunderstood, that we need to proclaim the gospel notwithstanding the nature of the response. Those who do accept and make an open confession would be saved and those who reject would be condemned. Rather, it is because the friendship of the living Lord is so meaningful, meeting the needs of the depths of our personalities, and because of the conviction that one day all will have to relate to him, in and through whom all lives exist and find their fulfilment, that we seek to communicate. That is to say that we neither make religious affiliation or belonging to the Church now, nor that we make the state of final salvation the chief motivations for this task of communication. It is high time that we came to an understanding which is in accord with the mind of Jesus on these two issues. Jesus spoke of the publican who prayed ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’ as the one who went home ‘justified’. For final acceptance he made ‘doing the will of God’ and not calling Jesus ‘Lord! Lord!’ the criterion. He said, ‘He that is not against us is for us.’ And he also said that all those who had given as much as a cup of water to his disciples would surely be rewarded. We could go on listing more and more such sayings which have not been theologically reflected upon by ‘militant evangelists’. The few episodes we shall provide below show that a non-confessional and a non-church membership oriented allegiance to the Lord can and does take place.

CHRIST THE ‘SANTHAMOORTHY’ (THE MERCIFUL)

One of our workers, a Hindu, had a family function. His child’s ears were to be pierced and a gold stud fixed. This ceremony is conducted around the age of three. It is a big occasion. Gifts and felicitations are showered on the child by relatives and friends. The ear piercing takes place after a ritual of worship. Karuppiah, one of our animators, insisted that I should initiate the ceremony by pronouncing the first blessing on the child. When I went to his home I was taken right inside their family shrine in which was housed an idol of Siva depicted as ‘Rudramoorthy’ (ie God of Wrath and Vengeance). The idol was a crudely made clay statue holding a blood-dripping sword in one hand and a chopped off human head in the other. The very sight evoked aversion and not even a sense of awe. I sat in front of this deity embarrassed and uncomfortable. Then came the local VIPs into the same shrine and sat in front of me. They were not in the least worried [P. 240](#) that a Christian had been asked into the shrine. Nor did they seem to worry that, contravening all traditions, I was to preside over a religious ceremony in that shrine. Rather they were

concerned about me and my feelings. The village head man who sat right in front of me must have sensed my discomfort and embarrassment. He opened the conversation saying, 'You must find it very difficult to sit in front of this deity being a Christian who worships Christ the Santhamoorthy (the Merciful)?' I immediately responded, 'Yes', and asked, 'Why have you depicted God, who is merciful, in this horrible way?' 'Well,' he answered, 'you see, for you, one who has been brought up in good Christian nurture, you know how to relate to people in a kind and just manner. But it is not so with me. My culture has made me the headman. People are taught to accept my ways and judgments without question. For fellows like me only such terror-inspiring gods are suitable. Otherwise we shall have little moral restraint.' This provided a good opportunity for me to share that Christian understanding of God does not mean that he puts up with nonsense. It is only because God could not tolerate injustice and tyranny that he has provided a way for repentance by dying for us. And if we spurn his mercy and presume upon it then we have to face his fierce anger. Then I told him and the others that the same Santhamoorthy inspired and led us in our struggles against injustice. After a time of sharing the child was brought and placed upon my lap. I blessed the child praying for the light of God's love to shine in its life and lit the lamp and initiated the ceremony. Then after I left I am sure they would have gone on with their traditional rituals. However, we did rejoice that there was a pre-understanding about Christ, that they were open enough to invite me to preside over their family religious ceremony and that they were extremely sensitive to my feelings. In that context of openness some more clarity was added to the already perceived understanding of Christ the Lord as an incarnation of Mercy.

THE PERCEPTION OF THE POWER OF CHRIST

On one occasion we had got into a terrible conflict with a local tyrant. We had thrown our weight behind a group of peasants whose lands had been fraudulently alienated by a village officer in connivance with the police and the bureaucrats. This man initially took a strong stand in opposing us through many intimidatory tactics and had begun to brag that he would invoke black magic and physically paralyze all the Christian staff of the Institute. Then eventually he began to develop cold feet at the unabated opposition he met with in the organized **P. 241** group of the peasants and came one day waving 'the white flag', saying he was prepared for a compromise. However, as he hoped for the restoration of the *status quo ante* without giving in much, we could not agree. Then as the negotiations were breaking up I was led to challenge him on his threat to invoke black magic. In the presence of a large crowd I dared him to invoke black magic and publish his deed abroad so that it would become obvious to everyone whether the evil spirits were powerful or whether Christ to whom we had committed ourselves and on whose behalf we were challenging the powers of injustice was the really powerful one. The people present were quite taken by that open challenge. Many thought we had let ourselves in for great danger. But quite soon it became obvious to all our associates that the Lord in whom we had put our trust was indeed powerful to protect us from the onslaught of evil spirits.

During that same period we visited the farm of one of our staunch supporters. This man was a Hindu Harijan. As he showed us round his farm suddenly he turned and said, 'You think only your Christ is powerful but I can demonstrate to you that our gods are also powerful.' I didn't quite understand the reason for this sudden challenge. He asked us to look into a large open irrigation well and asked us to estimate the depth of the water table. Then he led us to a small round well nearby and asked us to look in to see the level of the water. The irrigation well had water thirty-five feet below whereas the other well had water only ten feet from the ground. This man knew a little physics from practical

knowledge and so asked us to observe the anomaly. Against the principle of water finding its level one well had water at ten feet depth and the other down at thirty-five feet. Then he narrated an incident. It seems some years back a Brahmin family had come to worship in the nearby temple. Suddenly one woman became possessed and shouted that she would not touch water from the large irrigation well because it had been polluted by the touch of a Harijan and then went on to demand a new well be dug at the spot where the present small round well was. When they dug at the command of the possessed woman they struck water very quickly and the water level in that well had remained high ever since in spite of severe drought conditions. After this narration he asked me, 'Now tell me, are not our gods also very powerful like your Christ?' I did not seek to explain to him about the possibility of a top level spring which could not percolate due to a rocky basin. For still the phenomenon of the possessed woman locating such a spring remained. 'Well, I do concede that there was a phenomenon of some supernatural power at work,' I began my response, 'but don't you realize that the nature of [p. 242](#) the spirit that possessed the woman must have been evil, of the devil rather than of God. For God does not consider that water touched by a Harijan is polluted.' This person was convinced by my explanation. Much later this man and his family became Christians, though we never pressurized him or induced him with welfare schemes to become a confessing Christian. Even if he had not become a Christian the fact would still remain that he had understood Christ's power. What he lacked, however, was the perception to distinguish between Christ's power which is always an expression of his love and justice, over against more ambiguous manifestations of the noumenal world.

CHRIST'S CONSTRAINING INFLUENCE ON HIS FOLLOWERS

Although we rarely speak openly about our relationship to Christ as the chief motivating factor in our work for justice this perception has indeed taken deep roots as the following two episodes will show.

In a village called Kasavankundu the high caste people refused to allow Harijans to draw water from the common well when the well specially dug out for Harijan use dried up. We organized a protest public meeting. Then even those who had been friendly with us so far got together on caste lines and planned to disrupt the meeting resorting to violence if necessary. One Harijan supporter of the cause from another village called Ramankulam came to see me in the afternoon. He claimed that he had just returned after a visit to Kasavankundu where the platform was being erected for the evening's protest meeting. He said he overheard groups of high caste people making all kinds of plans to throw stones, to resort to beating up the crowd with sticks kept in a secret place ... and so on. Then he came up with this remarkable concluding statement: 'Well, if they try to stop you from participating you'd reply saying that the Lord Jesus Christ compels you to go notwithstanding all the threats *and I hear your Christ telling me clearly that I should be there with you!*' We were thunder struck by that kind of a confession from an illiterate old man.

The next episode is a less exciting story. In fact, it is no story at all, but nevertheless quite typical of what really is taking place. On New Year's Day the custom is for people to visit those whom they respect and hold in esteem. So on New Year's Day of 1985 a group of five village people came to the farm to offer their greetings and good wishes. They came with a gift of a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Underneath this picture they had written a small poem composed by one of them and signed below by all five of them. The poem invoked the indwelling power of Christ's love to be the constant influence on [p. 243](#) our lives and on their lives as well. It was not a prayer and invocation meant only for us.

The first *stychos* invoked Christ to dwell in our hearts and motivate us by the power of his love. The second *stychos* made the same invocation on their behalf. This picture hangs in my study-cum-office.

CHRIST AND THE SECULAR WORLD OF SOCIAL ACTION

Social action cannot be done in isolation. It can be done only with the support of other movements and organizations also interested in social justice. Therefore our attempts at organizing the oppressed to fight against feudal and caste oppression, and against bureaucratic and political corruption, have earned us many friends who are totally secular. These secular movements, by and large, look upon Christian involvement in social action with suspicion and for very valid reasons. First of all they suspect that behind our involvement in programmes there is a hidden conversion agenda. Secondly, they know that the majority of the church, people and leaders, are reactionary, openly supporting the *status quo* and the powers that sustain the *status quo*. So they cannot understand, quite legitimately, how we can claim to be in fellowship with such persons and under the authority of such a leadership. Thirdly, they are also suspicious of the intentions of the funding agencies from the Western world with a history of Christianity which has enjoyed patronage from rulers and governments who did not and could not subscribe to egalitarian principles. Finally, they hesitate to join hands with us in our programme, or to enlist our support for their programme of action, for fear that our commitment to non-violence may hinder the momentum of the action programme at very critical points. In spite of all these hurdles we have been able to establish friendship and gain solidarity at least with some secular movements and with some of no religious faith. Such friendship ties have paved the way for mutual challenge and sharing of religious and materialistic convictions.

It was during one such occasion a friend raised the question about the legitimacy of the Christian faith in the resurrection. He said he had a two-fold problem. First of all he could not believe rationally how a dead man could be raised from the dead to a radically different and immortal existence. Secondly, he thought that faith in resurrection would provide an escape route and take the wind out of the sails for action committed to establishing justice within history. I told him frankly that my faith in the risen Christ was first of all based on a real experience of continuing friendship and companionship with the risen p. 244 Jesus and that, on careful examination of the available evidence and testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, I found no difficulty in accepting the truth because I did not approach the evidence with a prior assumption about what is and what is not possible. However, I conceded that it would be difficult for those who were schooled in an atheistic view of life to see that the Christians are not superstitious.

While I was able to bear witness to my conviction I also felt that I had to meet his second difficulty. In my own experience my faith in the resurrection of Jesus and in the hope of resurrection for all has only enabled me to get involved without fear and without worry about immediate results. However, until that moment I had not reflected on the significance of the resurrection faith for social involvement. The question of my friend brought a sudden and unpremeditated answer which has ever since been a source of great inspiration and strength. The interpretation I could offer was as follows:

(1) The resurrection of Jesus affirms categorically and unequivocally that *matter* matters to God.

(2) In the context of repeated failures of revolutions and social reform movements to produce permanent, impeccable, and completely unambiguous results, the faith in the

resurrection alone provides a hope that permanent and radical transformation is possible. Therefore faith in the resurrection of Jesus alone provides the single anchor point in history which makes a hope for such a transformation in the future reasonable. For we have reason to believe that what happened to Jesus will happen to all humans and to the whole of human history.

(3) It is faith in the resurrection which enables us to take the failures and disappointments we meet with in our endeavour for justice in our stride because the resurrection of Jesus shows that God in his goodness and by the power of his love can turn tragedies into victories, and make even evil forces and their now victorious conspiracies serve his ultimate purpose for human history.

(4) The resurrection hope for all alone ensures that our history has meaning. For millions pass through life without meaning, in the present order of injustice. Only in the resurrection will this be offset. Finally, because they work with this hope, Christians are like people who plant trees in full confidence that they will themselves be enabled to reap the fruits. Secular humanists, although working for the same aims, are like those who plant trees hoping that some generation in a distant future will enjoy the fruits. They themselves have never been p. 245 able to taste them and they can only dream of them, knowing they will never be a reality in their own experience.

I have narrated a number of episodes which led to meaningful dialogue and which, in the process, helped us to reach better clarity about our own faith as well. However, it may still be pertinently asked whether we could be satisfied as having accomplished much, for the main emphasis of the gospel is a new relationship established with God on the basis of forgiveness of sins offered to us through the Cross of Christ. All the above episodes, admittedly, have at best only drawn attention to the Lordship of Christ without touching upon the question of human inability and unwillingness to respond to God. This indeed is a pertinent question and we must seek an answer.

It was providential that the students who come to spend a semester at the RTI are assigned the Fourth Gospel for study. This was by no means due to deliberate design. The curriculum, already drawn up before the inception of the Institute, had assigned the Fourth Gospel for detailed exegetical study for this particular semester. The Gospel has little emphasis on the Good News to the poor and apparently does not seem to concern itself with questions about temporal justice. Therefore, at the outset, it did not seem a fitting portion of Scripture for theological reflection for students to be trained in social action for justice. It was, however, through the study of this Gospel that we were led into a wholesome and comprehensive missiological perception which fully validated our secular endeavours to create a community concerned about justice issues and which would be ready to stick its neck out to challenge the powers of oppression, tyranny and corruption. It became a wholesome perception because it also provided answers to the question we have set out to answer.

The Fourth Gospel more than any other Gospel is concerned to explain how God judges the world and how he casts out the Prince of the World. This preoccupation also provides an indirect, but very clear, explanation of repentance. It is seen in terms of a turning aside from the world and its ruler and turning towards the Son who is lifted up (i.e. the Son of Man elevated to the cross and not to a position of power: [John 12:31-34](#)). It is by this means all men (people) will be drawn together.

This text is found in the context of the Greeks coming to see Jesus. The narrative seems deliberately to avoid any contact between Jesus and the Greeks who had expressed their wish to see him. And, strangely, at the end of the episode we are told that Jesus went and

hid himself (v 36) almost, as it were, to suggest that Jesus for some reason was not ready to see people of other faiths as yet. p. 246

In order to perceive the Johannine intention, therefore, we need clearly to understand the Evangelist's portrayal of Jesus as the Son of Man. The Son of Man is the One who has come down from heaven (3:14). Judgment is entrusted to the Son of God because he is the Son of Man (5:27). But the judgment takes place by the Son of Man *neither* because of his heavenly origin, *nor* because of his ascended power and glory, but as he draws every one to him while remaining lifted up on the cross.

This deliberate paradox needs to be carefully understood. Especially so because historically speaking, when Jesus was crucified, exactly the opposite of gathering together took place. When the Shepherd was struck the sheep were scattered. Therefore the gathering together of all people must be seen, not with reference to the historical cross of Jesus only, but perhaps as happening everywhere, wherever people are gathered in solidarity around those who suffer unjustly as a result of the continuing conspiracy of the powers of culture, religion and politics. Such a solidarity denounces the Prince of the World. They no longer fear him and have refused to be intimidated by his instruments. We could mention a few such instruments of the rule of this world through which he keeps people captive by blinding them and by creating unreasonable fears. Culture inhibits in many ways. The inhibitions become internalized. As, for example, when a physically handicapped man is made to believe that he is unfit for God; when a woman is made to think that she is a bad woman and that her presence on auspicious occasions would defile their auspicious character, or when a poor person is told to accept his lot as destined by either fate or by God. When such people realize the nature of the conspiracy and are emboldened to gather around the Son of Man who has been lifted up, the world of unjust values and structures stands judged and its ruler is thrown out because he has lost his grip over these people and gets ousted from his power. So far as the victims of oppression are concerned, the gathering around the Son of Man means becoming free from their internalized inhibitions and becoming bold enough to denounce the powers. This is one kind of repentance.

For many others, however, the Son of Man who has been lifted up provides a different kind of repentance. They are made to see clearly that, in so far as they acquiesced in injustice and enjoyed the fruits thereof, it is their sin which sent Jesus to the Cross and it is their sin which continues to oppress and victimize the powerless. They too have to say 'no' to the ruler of the world and learn to distance themselves from all the powers which the world puts at their disposal, making it possible for them to revel in the fruits of injustice. p. 247

This way of categorizing people is perhaps a little simplistic and too neat. For in many of us both aspects are true. We are a mixed bundle. We are victims and tyrants at once. For example a poor person joining hands with the other exploited in a just wage struggle may, at the same time, be a male chauvinist or a man who accepts caste distinctions as valid and joins hands with other communal forces to oppress those whom he considers to be people of low caste. But such categorizing does help us to see that in the 'Son of Man who has been lifted up' there is common cure for both kinds of ailments. The changed lives will be, on the one hand, marked by freedom and, on the other, marked by a strong bond of solidarity with all those who continue to be victims of the joint conspiracy of human culture, perverse religion and corrupt politics. Thus the oppressed and the oppressor are drawn together and all are liberated.

To put it succinctly the Son of God identifies himself with humanity and becomes the Son of Man. This identification is not limited to the incarnate life of Jesus. The incarnate life of Jesus is but one concrete, tangible expression of that ever-continuing identification

(for example, this same idea has been expressed in terms of the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world). Therefore saving faith in practical terms means, as far as the oppressed are concerned, to be liberated from the controlling powers of inhibitions and fears, coming as a result of a realization that these powers are being routed by God. For the oppressor, repentance and faith entail a turning away from participation in the gains of oppressive structures and values and expressing a solidarity with the oppressed. Thus a new humanity is born, a drawing together of all people is achieved by the Son of Man who has been lifted up. God does not save as an outsider. God gets caught up in the process and becomes the power of liberation. In so far as many of us participate in both predicaments, slavery and tyranny, we can experience both aspects of salvation. Salvation thus seen is a continuing process. Therefore the judgment of the world and the casting out of its ruler also is a continuing process. However this process should not be thought of as an unending process. This process will be completed and consummated. This is assured by the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead. Thus those who find freedom and are joined together in a new solidarity will enjoy fullness of freedom and enjoy totality of human solidarity for ever. Let us see this through one concrete example drawn from the secular world of social action.

In the Kodaikkanal Hills near Madurai two hundred families of repatriated stateless Tamils from Sri Lanka were turned into bonded labourers, by the labour contractors of a large company, with the [p.248](#) connivance of a powerful minister of the State Government who had vested interests in the company, and of the District Administration which 'kowtowed' to the political boss. The peoples' bondedness in near-slavery was first identified by a set of school children who belong to a Christian private school run by the American Mission. The local sub-collector, the number two officer of the District Administration, an honest and upright official, was alerted by his wife who worked in the school in an honorary capacity. This sub-collector is a Sikh and he had been a social activist during student days. Rarely do such people become bureaucrats, and, if any do, rarely do they remain uncorrupt. This man, by the providence of God, was different. He jumped into action. Simultaneously a Roman Catholic priest who had been in touch with these people also became aware of the subcollector's integrity and readiness to take action. His role was to encourage the bonded labourers to stand together boldly. For much depended on their willingness to be set free and their readiness to face trouble in the process. As soon as the sub-collector ordered their freedom, however, his boss, under instruction from the minister, revoked his orders and also began to brand the sub-officer as a subversive Sikh terrorist agent out to disrupt the administration and create social disturbance. It was at this stage that some of our friends, a group of young lawyers committed to justice, were drawn into the fray. The supreme court was mobilized through them by enlisting the support of an organization functioning for liberation of bonded labourers headed by a Hindu Arya Samaj Swamiji. While this legal battle was being fought the labourers were laid off from work and denied even the meagre sustenance given to them so far on the pretext of wages. They were also kept under arrest, for suddenly the minister whose vested interests were at stake and who held the portfolio for forests, posted guards around the forests as a conservation measure! So we had to find ways of reaching these people with food. Maintaining them with rice, lentils and salt (no oil, no vegetables, no meat) alone cost around ten thousand rupees per week. This money was raised by public collection; thus many sympathisers were drawn in. The support of the free press made it a nationwide news item. Finally the supreme court set up a commission of enquiry. The people were liberated and presently are supported by government dole pending full rehabilitation. However, the Sikh sub-collector has become the victim of a witch hunt. All kinds of rumours and scandals are spread abroad. Anyone who goes to his

house is noted by the police who keep a close watch simply to scare him and intimidate his friends. The police, we reliably learn, went so far as to try to implicate him in an arms scandal through eliciting a tutored deposition from a friend of his. Fortunately they p. 249 miscalculated the strength of the solidarity of the friendship between the Sikh sub-collector and his Hindu Punjabi friend.

This episode seems to me to illustrate [John 12:31-35](#) beautifully. The repatriated bonded labourers found their freedom, not physically only, but spiritually as well in a measure, for they had to muster up great courage and learn to stand together. Many attempts were made at terrorizing them as well as allure them into denying their bondedness. There were the middle class socially conscientized group, the press and the large public who usually acquiesce and continue to enjoy the fruits of oppression, although indirectly. This involvement provided a measure of spiritual freedom to them as well. The principle of Kodaikkanal School, an Australian, has also had to suffer as his visa has not been renewed. His school children, who come from very rich families, in so far as they identified themselves with the bonded labourers and raised a lot of money and gathered clothes and blankets for the poor victims, also experienced a measure of salvation. Finally, the fellowship enjoyed with the Hindu ascetic committed to the task of liberating the bonded labourers brought a new dimension to the solidarity experienced. What has happened *ad hoc* needs to become the order of reality if the degree of freedom and solidarity experienced is to find complete fulfilment.

Alas, however, while this was going on there were groups of Christians who began to criticize all the Christians who were involved as having dirtied their hands by politics. They said that this was not our Christian calling. We ought to be faithful in preaching the gospel and should not waste our time on such temporal matters. One very devout but rich Christian lady exclaimed after listening, 'Are we not all slaves? Then why should we bother about these few slaves?' And she also decried our efforts at feeding them during the period of the struggle as an act which would encourage laziness. 'If the poor get used to free food they will never care to work ...' This lady liberally gives to evangelists, hosts bands of preachers and even, at times, arranges for public gospel meetings completely under her patronage.

For those of us who have been able to see the Son of Man in Jesus all this makes sense and gives us certainly a far greater measure of satisfaction and meaning. Therefore, if people could be drawn into this sphere of perceiving meaning we should do that. Nevertheless we must recognize that we have to work against the weight of a Christian history which has been triumphalistic, narrow and exclusivist. A majority of Christians and the Christian institutions continue to participate in this history. Therefore, whether we should see mission in terms of church growth is a pertinent question. Then there is also the other question arising out of bonds of friendship, established with p. 250 people like Swami Agnivesh, the Hindu leader referred to earlier, whose standing with God is no doubt on a par with profound Christian experience. Therefore what should be our task? This will continue as a daunting question. For a Christian who has tasted the friendship of the crucified and risen Jesus and who has been drawn into the sphere of meaning described above cannot but continue to seek to share his experience. But such sharing has to be with humility arising out of the knowledge that God can draw all people to himself in diverse ways. We need to become able to identify this multi-faceted action of God and seek to cooperate with him. In this task the risen Lord will be with us unto the end of this age.

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