

## RETELLING JESUS' STORIES IN TODAY'S INDIA

**Most Rev Thomas Menampampil, SDB**

**Archbishop of Guwahati**

People love to tell stories. Crowds gather to listen. Men and women, young and old, sit for hours in rapt attention. Vergil's *Aeneid* began with the words, "*Conticuere omnes, intentique ora tenebant*", which meant 'All kept silent, and were in rapt attention with wide-open mouths'. The *Arabian Nights* used to thrill the audience. The *Panchatantra* taught. The *Jataka Tales* instructed. The *Ramayana* edified. The *Mahabharata* entertained, philosophized and educated. They tell us how we have come to be where we are and the way we are. We discover ourselves in the stories we hear, and see how we are related to the rest of the human family, the universe and Beyond. People in ancient times kept telling and retelling the stories drawing lessons for themselves and the progeny. Stories convince minds, they touch hearts, they lead to commitment.

### 1. The Great Stories of Humankind

Every Civilization has its own Grand Narratives. The Greeks had their *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Romans the *Aeneid*, the Anglo-Saxons *Beowulf*, the Celts *Leabhar Gabhala*, and similarly many others. People were familiar with the personalities who are seen as archetypes of virtue as well as vice. They become the characters of the collective unconscious. Not only great nations, but even the *humblest community* (tribe, ethnic group, caste ) has its own culture, and stories that tell of a glorious past, of a golden era, and of heroes and events, which give them an identity, and of which they are legitimately proud. Some of these traditions (of tribal, clan or caste origin) grow into sophisticated manuals of social behaviour and anthologies of philosophy.

As Christians we too have our collection of stories that tell of our origins, the adventures and misadventures of our ancients, reasons for self-confidence and dangers of failure: the Old and New Testaments, the record of martyrs, teachers, thinkers.

### 2. Didactic Epics

The larger Indian society has been trained to listen to the grand themes described in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The heroes and heroines in these epics are living figures within our civilizational world for example, Sita, Lakshman, Duryodana, Narada, Dhritarashtra. As we said earlier, sometimes the historic experiences of a particular society are reshaped into a working philosophy of life like the *I Ching* of Lao Tzu or a social code like the *Analects* of Confucius. Indian traditional wisdom was captured into books like the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* which made a profound impact on the South Asian civilization. They shape lives, give direction to communities, motivate human endeavour.

### 3. The Great Israelite Stories

***The Israelites lived by the Stories they heard from their Elders:*** The people of Israel *lived by their memories*. At a moment of national humiliation, they would remember what the Lord had done for them in earlier days. They would exclaim, "With our ears we have heard it, O God—our ancestors have told us about it, about the great things you have done in their time, in the days long ago" (Ps 44:1). "O Lord, I have heard of what you have done, and I am filled with awe. Now do again in our times the great deeds you used to do" (Hkk 3:2). It was their memories that gave them their identity, a sense of security and destiny. In them they found fresh motivation for living and hoping, fresh reasons for courage; a new heart for venture, a new inspiration for pressing forward. What they remembered of their past encouraged and urged them on in trial. Their memories also corrected, admonished and chastened them in moments of triumph. The lessons they learnt from these old narratives (Deluge, Exodus, destruction of the Temple, Exile etc.) enabled them to interpret their daily lives.

***Universal Appeal:*** The Israelites remembered the stories, not only those of national interest like their victories and defeats, but also those with a *Human appeal*: Abraham's hospitality, tensions in the family of Isaac and Jacob, the forgiveness of Joseph, the jealousy of Saul, the sin of David, Jesus' warmth towards his disciples, his compassion for the poor and the sick, his moral courage before the powerful, his friendship with Martha and Mary, his self-composure in suffering. These and other stories explore human nature so much at depth, and are so full of pathos, and so rich in message, that people of all civilizations have found them absorbing accounts.

There are other stories too, those of enormous Social interest and most relevant for our times: inter-ethnic tension in the family of Isaac because of Hagar and her son, and again because of Esau's Hittite wives (Gen 26:34-35), Egyptian exploitation of Hebrew slaves, Moses' struggle against Pharaoh for justice, tension in Moses' family because he married a Cushite woman (Num 12:1), the socially sensitive leadership of Nehemiah (Neh 5:1-13). John the Baptist calling for a change of heart (Mt 3:7-10), Jesus' denunciation of injustice and annunciation of new values (Mt 5:21-26.38-47; 6:1-4; 7:1-6; Lk 11:37-54; 12:1-3; Mt 5:2-12) are a few of them.

Then there are stories of *Mystic significance, various Encounters with God*: Adam's dialogue with his Creator, Noah's obedience to the divine command, Abraham's encounters with God, Jacob wrestling with Him, Moses' religious experience at the burning bush, with whom God spoke as a man spoke to his friend "face to face" (Ex 33), the collective religious experience of the Israelites at Mount Sinai, David's repentance, Solomon's eagerness for wisdom. This phenomenon of an encounter with a Mysterious Beyond continues into the life of Christ and later history: the temptation of Jesus, His baptism, transfiguration, His withdrawal into the mountain to pray, prayer at Gethsemane, Peter's repentance, Jesus' death on the cross forgiving, the resurrection, Pentecost, Paul's conversion.

#### 4. Choosing Relevant Stories

**To interpret the collective consciousness:** The art of successful storytelling depends on your ability to interpret the mood of the audience at a given time. When a storyteller from Nazareth addressed a crowd of poor Galileans on a hill-slope and said, "Blessed are the poor...", (Mt 5:3-7), his utterances gripped the attention of the people who had personally suffered these indignities.

When he went on to refer to the widow who was being refused justice ( Lk 18:3), the one who had to sweep out the whole house to recover a lost coin (Lk 15:8), those who were worried and helpless like sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:36), servants who had worked all day in the fields and had to come home and wait on his master while he ate, a master who would try to reap where he had not sowed and gather where he had not scattered (Mt 25:26) those who had to spend many a sleepless night waiting for the master's return (Lk 12:37), who had to jump to the master's tune and go when he said 'go' and come when he said 'come' (Matthew 8:9), who ate only the scraps of leftovers from their master's table (Mt 15:27), who knew from experience that the one who had more would be given even more, and that the one who had little even the little he had would be taken away from him (Mt 13:12)... all such people were mesmerized at his hope-filled message. They thought to themselves "How well he knows our situation, how concerned he is about our misery!"

And when he said "I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts" (Mt 9:13), they were thrilled. They hung on his lips. And when he predicted, "There are those who are last who will be first (Lk 13:30), they breathed a sigh of hope. When he denounced the religious teachers who laid heavy burdens on the poor, who sought to display their virtue, and who emphasized merely the external aspects of religion while violating its spirit (Lk 11:37-51), he was expressing the unexpressed sentiments and suppressed anger of many. The powerful were stunned; the powerless were stirred to their depths. He drove home the message with convincing stories (Matthew 13:34). And when he said "The Kingdom of God suffers violence and the violent take it away", the victims of violence may have said "How true! How does this son of a peaceful carpenter know all these things?" And people marveled at his words (Lk 4:22), and exclaimed, "Nobody has ever talked the way this man does!" (Jn 7:46).

**Prioritizing:** In order to be relevant to a community, you need to know its culture and history, interpret correctly the spirit of the era in which you live and re-interpret it in the midst of constantly changing social trends and conflicting forces at work in a particular context, and have a deep concern for the persons whom you are addressing. Interpretations that are rigidly formulated, jargon-loaded, platitudes-ridden, ideology-laden, over-simplified, and solutions that sound ready-made; these tend to ignore the complexity of the social and human realities of a particular situation and of the cultural currents and counter-currents at a given period of history.

Effective teachers make references to the community's inherited beliefs and cultural traditions and to its urgent needs of the present and fond hopes for the future. If the storyteller is fully inserted into the life of the people, he will know how to rephrase his story to suit the context and make it intelligible, acceptable and useful to the people.

That is what the *rabbi from Nazareth* did. His name was Jesus. See how he tackled the question of distinctions that people made between persons from different communities. The Jews used to look down on the Samaritans, despise the Canaanites, and hate the Romans. Jesus made no such distinctions, he taught

that they were all children of the same Father, all were equal. He began his narration in this manner, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves". It was an exciting story. People looked up. A Levite and a priest passed by without helping, said Jesus. "How is this story going to end?" people wondered. It was a stranger, a foreigner, a despised Samaritan that came to the help of the wounded man. The message was clear: the one whom you hold in contempt may be the better person, people who claim to be religious can be insensitive, compassion for the needy cutting across cultural and ethnic prejudices is at the heart of religion, we should come to the aid of needy persons around us.

## 5. Generating Values, and Giving Hope

**The Central Concerns:** The Teachings of Jesus and great teachers were centred round some of the core concerns of humanity: justice and peace, love and forgiveness, family values and neighbourhood relationships, honesty and uprightness, sincerity and authenticity, solidarity and generosity, social harmony, compassion for the suffering, faith and prayerfulness, respect for life and concern for the poor, and a profound sense of responsibility for human well-being. Thus their teaching had universal appeal: it is a language everyone understands, and a theme everyone is interested in.

**Culture and Religion as the Sources of Values:** Values are generated in the bosom of a community, fostered by a culture, handed down from one generation to another by education both within the family and in other institutions of socialization, and strengthened and planted deep into the hearts of people by religious training. Once they become a part of a culture and receive a religious sanction through faith, they form the most precious portion of the heritage of a people and a civilization. Central concerns of genuine faith like encounter with God, repentance, renunciation, sacrifice, fidelity, prayer experience, authenticity are kept alive in the stories of great teachers.

**Stories of Hope for the Poor.** Curiously, history seems to reveal fact that the Indian genius often lies 'outside the mainstream'. Vyasa, the author of *Mahabharata*, and Valmiki, the composer of the *Ramayana*, belonged to what we call Dalit communities today. So did medieval mystics like Kabir, Tukaram, and others. Buddha belonged to the Sakya clan; Asoka was related to the Lichchavi tribe. Harshvardhana was probably a tribal. Many of the ruling dynasties in India sprang from a tribal background, though, later, seeking legitimization from Brahmins, they Sanskritized themselves, claiming the status of Kshatriyas. In our own days, when India needed to write a Constitution, it was Ambedkar, another Dalit, who was asked to help. It would not be presumptuous to suggest that Dalits, Tribals and other marginalized communities are going to make far greater contribution to the national cause in the days to come, if only given a chance.

But this may call for assistance. Christian workers who are at the service of Dalit and Tribal communities have a great work ahead of them. People, who have long been silenced, suppressed and marginalized, may have shrunk into a fatalistic and passive attitude. Ambition has to be planted into their lives and energy injected, so that they begin to take their destinies into their own hands and undertake various initiatives for their own betterment. Christian stories must vibrate with mass culture and embody the liberative motifs.

## 6. Jesus' Way of Justice and Asian Way of Harmony

But even in fighting for what is right, there is a Jesus' style. Christians call it an evangelical style. God's justice is a *justice that defends*, not destroys. Zeal for justice that is not an expression of love can become an untamable monster. Aggressive, impetuous, and self-righteous denouncers can look like the re-incarnations of the ancient inquisitors, heresy-hunters and burners of witches at the stake. In Christian tradition, justice and peace must embrace. They must make place for charity, for, *Deus caritas est* (1 John 4:8). Denunciation that does not end with a word of blessing can prove to be effectively a curse. As Pope Benedict says, Church "has to *reawaken the spiritual energy* without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prosper (*Deus Caritas Est*, 28a).

A happy blending of what looks like opposite is neither impossible nor undesirable. It is generally considered a part of the Asian genius to harmonize opposites. It is the failure to work out a happy synthesis and attain a new harmony, a new balance in thought that leads historic processes to swing from one exaggeration to another, from one radical position to another. One has to plant moderating influences into the mechanisms built up for pressing one's rights or fighting for one's community. Such an attitude springs from one's concern for others and firm confidence that the future belongs to the 'victims of history'. Jesus has absolutely reassuring words of better times for history's victims. He considered people who suffer specially 'blessed', because, he believed, the future belonged to them (Mt. ch 5).

## 8. Stories to Build the Future

**Stories to Remember, Stories to Forget:** The stories we tell about the past can influence existing attitudes in a society and give a direction to its future. That is why we ought to tell those stories that heal personal and collective wounds, reconcile communities in conflict, propose life-promoting initiatives, encourage healthy relationships, and urge future-building activities. When people remember good things about us or about our people, we feel encouraged. It is equally true that we ourselves imbibe prejudices against other communities from the stories we hear or read: prejudices are passed on from parents to children, from the older generation to the younger. Such stories go into recorded histories and into the collective memories of communities.

We feel proud of the good things that Megasthenes, Fa-Hien, Hsuen-Tsang, Marco Polo, or Alberuni said about India. We feel unique. At the same time we can be quite upset about the less flattering things that someone wrote. When historians refer to the contribution of India to mathematics or science in ancient times, we feel recognized. When sociologists criticize our caste-system, or travelers speak about our urban untidiness, we feel misunderstood. For the same reason, when we tell stories about other communities and other nations we should speak with respect, appreciate their contribution to humanity, avoid exaggerating their weaknesses, put their mistakes in the historic context so that they may be understood with sympathy.

Then there are also stories to be completely forgotten. Would it help if the Koreans kept remembering the Japanese harshness on them during the last World War? Or the Jews the Nazi horrors? Or the ex-colonies the colonial excesses? Almost every country or community has been both aggressor and victim in different periods of history in reference to some other country or community. The sooner the communities concerned put their past behind and jointly work towards the solution of common problems, the earlier they will emerge as a mighty united force to construct a common future. We cannot wish into non-existence historical figures like Genghis Khan, Attila, Timur, Babur, Aurangzeb, Ahmed Shah Durrani, Nadir Shah, Hitler, Stalin or anyone else who has inflicted sufferings on others. However, we have to learn to recycle these hurtful raw materials, build on the debris of history, and heal the memories of historic injuries. Those ghosts have to be exorcized, collective anger put out, and healing prayer said: over Pearl Harbour, Panipat, Somnath, Plassey, and Ayodhya and hundreds of other places.

Recycling negative memories is an art by itself. However, it is a skill that can be learned and developed. We begin by consciously cultivating positive memories of persons and events in our personal life or collective existence. Could, for instance, Muslims remember how Christian teachers in West Asia, well-versed in Hellenic culture, introduced the newly conquering Arab leaders to the treasures of the Greek civilization? Could Christians cherish the memories of what Arab scholars in Spanish Universities contributed to the Western civilization by introducing Plato, Aristotle and other authors to Christian thinkers? Could people who have been recently set free from colonialism remember how they were introduced to the ideas and opportunities of Modernity, including ideas about the dignity of the individual and liberty for their nation, during the negative experience of being ruled by others? Could those who admire the Taj Mahal remember that even though it was patronized by a Muslim emperor, Hindu artists and Christian designers worked along with their Muslim friends to construct it? Could we congratulate an Islamic Bangla Desh for choosing a Hindu Tagore's song as its national anthem? Can we recycle all things negative in our life into fresh energies: anger into admiration, indignation into compassion, bitterness into tenderness. Paul said with amazing determination, "We take every thought captive and make it obey Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). We wish to take every sentiment captive and make it obey Christ.

**Telling Tales of Forgiveness, the Way to the Future:** If Jesus was concerned about justice and welfare, he was also concerned about sinfulness, corruption, and the need for repentance. He spoke of love, forgiveness and the possibility of a new beginning. If he sought the company of despised and oppressed people like lepers, prostitutes, zealots and desperadoes, he did not keep away from persons who used to be considered oppressors like publicans (Levi), tax -collectors (Zaccaheus), and members of the priestly or Pharisaic community(Nicodemus or Simon the Pharisee (Lk 7: 36-50).

If it should happen that the victims of today's injustice seek to punish their oppressors too severely instead of entering into critical dialogue with them (evoking thought, eliciting self-criticism, inviting self-correction), and begin to act aggressively with the aggressor, 'the future' slips too fast from their hands in favour of the new victims of history. In other words, unless we work out a situation of 'stimulating harmony' and usher in a 'culture of responsibility' to each other, society will not take a single step forward. One group will keep dragging the other behind.

One needs to remember that the creativity of the poor is expressed, most of all, not in aggressiveness and anger, but forgiveness and faith. It is the ability to forgive that enhances the personhood of diminished persons, invests them with special dignity, and equips them with a sense of equality with even the mightiest

powers on earth. The cry of the poor is not a war-cry spurred on by social radicals, but the expression of a spiritual hunger, of trust and of confidence in the One Who, they know, will intervene in their behalf without fail. It is the creativity of the poor that gives a new direction to human history. The great historian Arnold Toynbee in his voluminous '*A Study of History*' repeatedly refers to the contribution of the poor in bringing a religion into existence and giving rise to a new civilization in their mighty attempt to keep surviving and building their future.

**Transforming Stories:** What causes anxiety in society is not merely economic deprivation or social discrimination, but a situation of moral decline, social divisiveness, and cultural degeneration. The storyteller must go beyond pious platitudes and denunciation of what evidently stands condemned. His/her stories should aim at exerting a moral influence on society in such a way that it feels challenged to review its value-systems, revise its living norms and reorganize its self-improvement energies according to certain universally acceptable codes of human behavior. Any style of conscientization, organization of the oppressed, or struggle for justice that does not contribute significantly towards a *cultural regeneration*, reaffirmation of moral values, recognition of the need for greater transparency, resistance to a culture of death, fostering of a sense of mutual belonging and mutual concern will not be found adequate. In an age when entire systems collapse, ethical principles vanish from public life and violence becomes entrenched in society, can we work out a new consensus on commonly held values that will contribute to the survival of humanity? It is in trying to answer this question that people have bumped into God.

The task we have in hand is so great that it will call for super-human resources and the spiritual strengthening that comes from a mystic encounter with the Divine. Amartya Sen said that it was these words of the Upanishads, "What should I do with that, by which I do not become immortal?" that set him thinking of not relying merely on the GNP and GDP in judging development, but giving attention to its 'human' dimension. An ancient Indian asked, "If men thought of God as much as they think of the world, who would not attain salvation?" (Maitri Upanishad 6:24). There are many such statements and stories that give evidence of intense human effort to reach beyond immediate human experiences and attain a deeper insight into the whole of reality.

Gautama Buddha, the son of a tribal chief in eastern India is said to have attained such *Enlightenment*. There are similarly the stories of Moses, Mohammed, and the originators of several living religions who are reported to have had a mystic encounter with God that transformed them. They in turn transformed entire societies and gave shape to new value-systems and religious traditions that have remained to our own days. Minds and hearts have been changed, societies transformed. We have much to learn from them all. Jesus' stories are transforming ones. He has given unique teachings, done unique things, told unique stories, and has given a mandate that his stories be retold for the benefit of humankind till the end of time. We shall speak about these things in the following sections.

**Engendering a Sense of Responsibility:** It is evident that those who exercise authority should exercise it with a great sense of responsibility. In the same way, those who command political power or material resources should rule society and administer resources with an equal sense of responsibility (in Christian vocabulary, exercise 'Stewardship'). Even with a greater sense of responsibility should those who occupy a privileged position to win the attention of the masses fulfill their mission. I am referring to those who influence minds and shape public opinion. For, they can either guide or misguide entire societies, build up or ruin future generations. In this category I would put persons like teachers, professors, political leaders, *media personnel*, artists, and in the religious context, theological thinkers and writers.

Journalistic sensationalism may be commercially effective, but can distort the vision of the readership. Ideological or theological sensationalism may make you a hero for a while, but you can disorient communities. Ideas that build up resentment or de-motivate people from pursuing noble goals or committing themselves to lasting human good, can bring disaster upon societies and nations. Seeking brief popularity for fashionable public stands on uncertain issues is a crime. On the contrary, if such persons, especially those in the media bring a sense of responsibility to their mission, they can educate the public, build up, heal, and reconcile communities. If they are Christians, they can tell the stories of Jesus and pass on his core teachings to the general public. They do win attention in today's world.

## 9. Stories about Jesus

**Unique Stories on a Unique Person:** The stories about Jesus were dramatically told by his disciples and carefully written down and gathered into a compilation called the *Gospels*. They continue and complete the Israelite stories, and together they form an impressive collection called the *Bible*. For Christian believers the *Bible* is a sacred book, written under divine inspiration. It is the word of God. Christians believe that all the

earlier stories in Israelite tradition pointed to Jesus. They hold that Jesus' stories propose a meaningful way of living and invite human beings to their eternal destiny. People have found in these stories unbelievable consistency and irresistible convincing power. The teachings contained therein have transformed the hearts of millions of people down the centuries and renewed entire societies.

A person who is sincerely in search of Jesus should seek an encounter with him like Peter and Andrew, James and John, Mathew and Nathaniel, Nicodemus and Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman and the Syro-Phoenician woman. Or like the Roman officer who said, "This man was really the Son of God" (Mk 15:39). For if you fail in that encounter, your arguments won't help you. On the contrary, you ought to study him more closely, his life, his love, his gracious words, his help, his healings, the style of his dealings, the rare way he accepts sufferings, the unique manner in which he gives up his life. Forgiving! Is he not unique? If not, who is? Your firm belief in his uniqueness is not a sign that you belong to a religion of 'Semitic' origin, as is often argued, but that you stand by your convictions, that you are a person of faith. Such a person is respected in our society as a person of caliber.

**Unique Stories to be Told in a Unique Manner.** Jesus' stories are about God's loving kindness reaching out to every person in human society and his caring concern for the whole of creation. They are never exclusive of persons, communities, castes, tribes, nations, ethnic groups. They give an encouraging and reassuring word about a Father who cares for all His children.

When I say these stories are to be told in a unique manner, I do not mean there is only one way of telling Jesus' stories. Peter speaking to fellow-believers on Pentecost day had one approach, Paul speaking to the Athenians, persons who were total strangers to Israelite traditions had another. Jesus himself addressing the crowds by the sea of Galilee adopted one tone in speaking, but when he was sharing profounder matters more intimately with his close disciples he adopted another. When he was challenging the scribes and Pharisees to live out the fuller demands of their faith generously he adopted one pose, but when he wanted to encourage the oppressed masses who were like 'sheep without a shepherd' he adopted another. He could use the harshest language when speaking to an intimate friend like Peter, "Get behind me, Satan" (Mt 16:23), he said; but he would have the kindest words for a notorious sinner, "Sin no more" (Jn 8:11). Jesus' approach to different persons too was different: Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman, the rich young man, Herod, Pilate, the paralytic person, the grateful leper. To each person he offered the assistance he/she needed. The content of a medicine may be the same, but there is the possibility of infinitely varied combinations and manner of administering it.

Today's storyteller too should adapt his narrating style to the need of the hour and nature of the audience. He/she will notice, for instance, how the religious sensitivity of different communities in India may differ. Our Hindu friends from a high caste background, especially of *Brahmin* origin, will be attracted by the religious depth of the Christian message, its emphasis on interiority, contemplation, silence, renunciation, spiritual discipline, asceticism. But those of the *middle castes* would have a more pragmatic outlook and admire the efficiency of Christian works in the field of education, health and similar areas. Those of the *humblest castes and tribal background* find encouragement in the disinterested service of Christian workers in the area of social uplift, development, relief and rehabilitation.

The real skill of the storyteller is to find out where his interlocutor is in his/her heart and mind, in his aspirations, ambitions and life struggles, and make it the starting point of his dialogue.

In Christian sharing, in spite of differences of style in communicating, there should be some common elements in every context: 1. that your eagerness to reach out to all with the stories of Jesus is an expression of your *sincere love*, 2. that it proceeds from your *profound convictions and deep faith*, 3. that there are *deeds to match your words*, that there is a *spiritual unction* in the manner you share them. That is being unique in telling the story of Jesus.

#### **10. Communication: Words vs Images**

**Communication Quotient** : The Israelite accounts refer to certain persons of extraordinary faith, specially inspired leaders, and prophets who spoke to their people with unbounded enthusiasm. Many of them were convinced that they were speaking on behalf of God to the believing community. Others were confident that what they were saying were concrete applications of His message in their immediate context. And so they spoke fearlessly. They thundered against evil, injustice, religious hypocrisy. They spoke with passion. They challenged. They denounced the leaders. They chided the people. They predicted God's wrath. They announced doom. They called for a change of heart. And when people repented, they assured them of God's forgiveness. They spoke of His compassion. They encouraged. They comforted. They announced a

golden era of universal harmony and perfect well-being. Whatever they said was no secret matter. They spoke in public. "Go tell it on the mountain" (Is 58:1; 63:7; Jer 4:5; 50:2 Ez 6:3; 12:19; 36:6), the messengers were told. And Jesus asked his disciples, "Go into the highways and bylanes" (Lk 14:23), and again, "What you heard in secret announce it from the housetops"(Mt 10:27).

We find that the prophets, Jesus himself, or Paul his apostle, were amazingly skilled in communication: knowing how to choose the topic for each occasion, relating it with a scriptural passage, beginning with a popularly debated issue of their days, asking a question, changing topic, winning attention, inserting a story, dramatizing the message with an acted parable, raising the voice, lowering the tone, refusing to answer, asking a counter-question...and most of all making people think. The prophetic task today is not necessarily denouncing and humiliating people, but taking them to their deeper selves, making them think, and helping them to correct themselves and move in a new direction. This seems to be closer to the Asian style of confronting. For, we believe in the power of thought, we have complete confidence in the Gospel (Rom 1:16). When the Christian communicator is addressing his/her message across cultures, he should seek to be far more sensitive, and creative according to the possibility and need of each situation, invoking his practical and pastoral wisdom in each context. We shall discuss this matter in a later section.

**Christian Tradition:** Jesus spoke in pictures: light, salt, lamp, net, coin, mustard seed, fig tree, living water, straying sheep, the sower who went to sow, the man who traveled from Jerusalem to Jericho, the man who distributed his wealth before leaving on a long journey. He taught nothing without the use of parables (Mt 13:34). If we explore further and look at Jesus' activities, we will notice that his work of healing and feeding were symbolic actions; they pointed beyond the immediate benefit it conferred. After he had opened the eyes of the blind man, he spoke of himself as the Light of the world. After he had fed the crowds, he referred to himself as the Bread of Life. The 'word' explained the 'deed', and made the message clear.

The Christian tradition in the East expounded religious doctrine with rich use of images in teaching, hymns and liturgy. It is said that the Russians accepted Christianity, because the messengers that King Vladimir sent out to the Byzantine court were profoundly impressed by the splendour of the Eastern liturgy. The Western tradition too gave importance to educating people in faith through the use of images: in art, architecture, music, paintings, sculpture, stained glass windows, forms of asceticism and religious discipline, Christian calendar pedagogically marked with celebrations and by Christian observances. The colour, dignity and splendour surrounding the Liturgy had an educative and formative value. Even small details were loaded with meaning. It really proves that it is beauty that communicates best: changes minds, converts hearts, stimulates action. The Reformation ushered in an era of the 'culture of the word' in the West (Wessels 162). Statues, paintings and many other things of symbolic value were banished from places of worship, and practices and observances from Christian life. The subsequent success of precise sciences only went on to strengthen this trend and build up an over-confidence in the power of the 'word'. Greek philosophy had already been inclined in that direction. With the popularity of the TV in modern times and the revival of folk art (dances, mimes, skits, theatricals) and indigenous ways of communication in various parts of the world, we are returning to an era of images once again.

Let us take the argument one step further. Our work of education, health and social transformation should point in some manner beyond the work itself; it should have some reference to the message of Jesus. If it has no sign-value, it has lost its purposefulness. It has become a soulless service. Rather, it should become an icon of God's love for children, the sick or the poor in each context. A Christian community living in unity and acting as an agent of economic development, human promotion, and social harmony ought to be a sign of God's presence and action in that society.

## 11. Doing Communication

**Communicating authentically:** The amazing story of Mother Theresa's service to the least of humankind ('the poorest of the poor') has an eloquence of its own. What she has done was to translate the words of Jesus "What you have done to the least of my brethren, you have done unto me" (Mt 25:40) into a language of life and love. And everyone understood its meaning. We may look at other examples. For St. Vincent de Paul serving the needy was sheer joy. He experienced ecstasy in being centred outside himself in the poor. He considered it as an encounter with God. There are many other examples of eloquent Christian charity that we can quote: the services of Fr. Damien at Molokai, Abbe' Pierre, Dorothy Day, Catherine Doherty, Jean Vanier. All their activities were pointers to Jesus' life, his work and his central message. In our own country, Fr. Constant Lievens stood up for the illiterate Tribals in Chotanagpur for Jesus' sake and defended their land. And the tribal people understood the message and accepted Jesus' way in large numbers. Sr. Rani Maria laid down her life for the Dalits of central India. Similar things have happened in different parts of our country and among the Tribals of the Northeast. And miracles do take place.

Being close to the poor is a spirituality in itself. It is both educative and formative. It is a path to egolessness and to God. Serving the deprived and the marginalized is the most forceful retelling of Jesus' mighty deeds among the helpless in our days. Henri Nouwen spent the last years of his life among the handicapped. Such a reputed author did not feel his final days wasted. Hundreds and thousands of missionaries consider it a privilege to spend their lives among the poorest of the poor: rural masses, people on remote mountains, communities living in mid-deserts, on river-islands like Majuli (Assam), near coal mines, shanty-towns, slums, refugee-camps. As new forms of poverty are rising in different parts of the world, persons who love Jesus are rushing to the aid of their victims. They do all they can to respond to the anxieties caused by HIV/AIDS, SARS, TB, malaria, drug-addiction, illiteracy, unemployment, pornography, threats to culture, erosion of values, urban violence; increase in the number of street children, divorcees, unwed mothers, prostitutes, handicapped persons, exploited women, untrained youth, legal and illegal migrants, refugees, gambling (casino) centres, and persons displaced by development projects. Stories about these Christian workers are worth telling. They motivate committed human effort for a better world.

## 12. 'Depth' Factor

**Jesus' stories invoking the Ethos:** Searching for depth means going beyond the social goals that missionary teams set before themselves. Studies conducted by certain evangelical churches in traditionally Christian countries reveal that those churches at the service of a mere 'Social Christianity' went on the way to decline, once the social goals were attained. In fact, those who rejected the churches first were precisely those who had benefitted most from the church's social programmes. On the other hand, those churches that offered a 'Pastoral Service', i.e. those who retained an element of 'mystery' in their life, relationships and organization, while not neglecting the community's social needs, continued to thrive and to grow. While they were serious about the social goals in the immediate context, they made sure that their activities pointed further and reminded people of their eternal destinies.

Retelling the stories of Jesus in a life-transforming manner is called 'Evangelization'. It means communicating the message in depth. The values of the Gospel must come into every area of life: marriage and family, trade and commerce, arts and professions, politics and government, culture and international relations. The Gospel must be so offered that it influences the community's collective thinking and doing (ethos), typical behavioural patterns, dominant values and major interests, habits, customs, scale of values, codes of conduct (Carrier 87). In fact the evangelization of culture gives rise to a genuine spiritual upsurge.

**Evoking Interiority:** Speaking of the transforming quality of evangelization, we realize that unfortunately today we are caught up in shallow waters. We are lost in a discourse of the most pragmatic nature, mere material welfare, economic development, egalitarian property distribution, as though those who have already developed in the material sphere and enjoy somewhat equitable sharing of wealth and power have attained bliss. What about the human hunger for spiritual values? Unless the lessons that Jesus taught transform the personal lives of individuals and the social life of communities, peoples and nations, we know his stories have not been told effectively. Economic development alone cannot be the goal of Christian believers. For, "Man does not live on bread alone" (Mt 4:4).

If we wish to penetrate the deeper meaning of Jesus' stories, we need the guidance of a God-realized person. The Asian society looks up to persons who exude calm inner serenity, quiet joy, gentleness; who are known for austerity of life, silence, humble service and respectful approach to persons and traditions. Such qualities give evidence of personal depth. In fact, what Asians look for in a religious person is renunciation more than efficiency, moral authority than mobilizing skills, God-experience than political correctness. They long to see sincerity, authenticity, and genuineness in such persons. But it can happen that an enquirer comes across an Evangelizer, the carrier of so profound a message, totally lacking in depth: depth as a person, depth in conversation, depth in relationships, depth in understanding God's word, depth in relating with God.

**Witness in Communication:** The radical message of the Gospel stories is best attested by persons who live that message in its radical form. When Gospel challenges are lived in boldness and generosity, they have an unbelievably great convincing power. And if that generosity equips the evangelizer to stand firm and faithful even to the point of death, his/her witness becomes eloquent beyond measure. One thinks of Rev. Graham Staines or Fr. Arul Das who did precisely that. We think of many martyrs who witnessed to what they believed in the same manner. We look forward to similar eloquence and the same quality of witnessing to the Gospel today. Only such generosity and courage can awaken an apathetic society to its senses and comfortable missionary teams to the generosity demanded by their evangelical promises. Such heroic souls

become icons of fearlessness, giving an irrefutable proof of their faith in Jesus. It is only when the evangelizer is capable of walking that far, shall he/she touch the soul of Asia and stir the millions in this ancient land to make a decision for Christ.

We have come a long way in this reflection. We have seen that evangelization implies being involved in human development and living through the painful realities of social tension, bringing about reconciliation and peace, building up human communities in the context of cultures, unraveling the mysteries of human existence, accompanying people on their pilgrimage to God, wounded and constantly searching as we evangelizers ourselves are. It demands respect for people's traditions and religious experiences, preparedness to be a co-pilgrim, to be a humble searcher, while offering guidance based on faith. It calls for humility, it calls for courage, it calls for exceptional daring. It may even call for readiness to witness to Jesus paying the ultimate price: death. Such persons of evangelical boldness have become icons of God's love for his people like Oscar Romero, John Paul II, Rani Maria and others. May be, some of us will have the courage to say with Thomas, "Let us also go and die with him" (Jn 11:16).

### 13. Across Cultures

**Cultural Sensitivity:** There are thousands of Christian workers in India today offering services across cultures in the fields of education, health, economic development, and social justice. They are all trying to retell the stories of Jesus, each in his/her own way. They cannot go only by the internal norms of Christian zeal, they must also pay attention to the collective sensitivity of human groups. Crossing the borders of culture, they are stepping into sacred grounds. They are moving into intimacy zones of a community to which it allows admission only on a selective basis. Only to those who vibrate with the community are given access to the inner chambers of its cultural identity. Not every do-gooder, social activist or evangelical crusader is necessarily a welcome guest. If he goes against the grain of the community, all his exertions will be wasted or their effectiveness greatly reduced. So much depends on the dexterity, delicacy, the psycho-social perception and sensitivity with which he deals with individuals and communities. I am speaking of that undefinable skill for understanding and dealing with cultural realities that makes a person a wizard in culturally diverse communities. Unfortunately some of our justice-fighters and evangelical zealots seem to ignore the configurations of culture.

Hence the importance of self-criticism when we try to introduce changes into a community that affect individual human lives and society as a whole. We can do harm even when we mean well in propagating ideas and values that are alien to a local culture in an indiscreet way<sup>1</sup>. Culturally sensitive presentation of the Gospel has nothing to do with self-righteous denunciation of others even in the cause of justice. Such pretension to moral superiority can be extremely unconvincing. The right way of presenting the Gospel draws forth the dormant good (the untapped potential for good, hidden in those cultures, civilizations) in persons and communities to which the message is addressed.

**Recognize Cultures:** Never ignore the positive cultural values present in the community for which you are working. Make culture your ally, and you will achieve impossible things. Jesus did not come as a threat to people's cultural heritage, ethnic identities, national heritage, healthy traditions, anthropological diversity, ancient wisdom, inherited bonds and kinships, heirloom of ideas, civilizational archetypes, nor people's native religious genius. He came to affirm and uplift, to fulfill and perfect, to heal and empower; not to damage and destroy, to denounce and derail, to deny and reject everything of value. He will not break the bent reed, nor put out the flickering lamp.

Let me say a word of appreciation for the cultural sensitivity of our Hindutva friends. We ought to respect them for their eagerness to defend and preserve some of our civilizational strengths: religiosity, family values, community cohesion, attachment to tradition, admiration for renunciation, respect for elders, modesty in dress, concern for life, commitment to service, and others. We shall stand firmly with them in trying to preserve and strengthen these values that form the core of our inherited traditions. Similarly there are many precious elements in the life and traditions of every tribe, caste and ethnic group that inhabits this land, which we are eager to preserve and strengthen: the ethos of a community, its value systems, religious perceptions, inner orientations, collective perspectives, worldview, ideas, traditions, language, customs, art forms.

An Evangelizer ought to develop the skill of interpreting the religious psychology of a people if he/she wishes to be successful in his/her work of sharing his faith. At the first stage, he seeks to present the Gospel in such a manner as to make it intelligible and acceptable. He enters into dialogue with the local community using their own categories of thought and expressions. He concedes to the believing community, in whom the indigenous culture vibrates, the freedom to evaluate, accept, reject, assimilate and transform the various

elements in such a way as to work out a synthesis, an authentic symbiosis. If he notices something contrary to the Gospel in the local culture, he draws the community to reflection, self-criticism, and rejection of that element. As an outsider, it is best that he keeps away from hasty judgements, generalizations and offensive statements. He remains always a humble guide, being himself guided by his religious authorities and offering suggestions with deference to all local sensitivities. And all persons concerned try to build on the positive elements present in the culture. A community that has accepted the Gospel according to these principles remains open to the Universal Church and the on-going reflection that continues.

**Respect Selfhood:** If anything that the evangelizer does appears like a threat to the selfhood of a community, resistance is inevitable. The most precious treasure a tribe, ethnic group or society has is its identity, individuality, self-pride, unique heritage. It is important to show absolute respect to this selfhood. Can a change in the area of religion be made in the way of enhancement of a community's identity rather than a threat, and in the way of enrichment of its value-system? That is the question. Any sharing of the Gospel (evangelization) or any acceptance of the evangelical message (conversion) that does not contribute to this inner growth falls terribly short of what is expected from the great experience. We must humbly admit, we have made mistakes in the past and we do still. But we can do things right as well. Sharing the Gospel becomes such a joy for everyone when it is offered as an all-round enrichment of a person or a community.

Speaking of inculturation, we ought to remember that culture is an organic whole. Pilfering individual cultural elements from other religious and cultural traditions (*kleptomania*) without any reference to their cultural meanings and contexts can be confusing, even hurtful. On the contrary, successful inculturation should create security, not tension; enhance identity, not cause alienation; create social harmony, not disaffection.

#### **Conclusion: Inviting to Christ's Friendship (2 Cor 5:19)**

Jesus called his disciples friends. He specifically told them that he would not call them his servants, but friends (Jn 15:15). It was on this love he built the bond of relationship that held his disciples together. The disciples of Jesus are not looking after their own interests. They are to reach out with love and service, telling the story of the Father's plan for humanity. Jesus explained to his disciples the reason for calling them his friends: he had told them everything he had heard from his Father (Jn 15:15), that they in turn might keep telling others the same story, constantly befriending ALL to the Father.

Some time ago an Indian filmmaker Preeti Chandrakant told a thrilling story through a picture she produced with the name *Jesus goes to India*. It won an award at the Trento International Film Festival in Italy. On being criticized for her non-biblical presentation of Jesus, she said her intention was not so much to prove that Jesus had visited India as to tell the world that Jesus was true to every teaching of Hinduism. She said she had spent nine years in preparation and had read the Bible several times. She pointed out that the message of Jesus where he says 'I am the way, the truth and the light' and 'only through me does one reach the Father' is basically a Hindu notion. She had been a student in a Catholic school. She wanted to prove that there was more of Jesus than what some of his followers made of him. She described her film as a "Spiritual Odyssey" (Indian Currents, April 21, 2002). Truly, many more are invited to join this Odyssey. Mahatma Gandhi felt all his childhood learnings affirmed, when he came across the Sermon on the Mount for the first time. He did not perceive it as an alien teaching. He felt that the Gospel message was very closely intimate to him and indigenous to his society. People keep claiming to have had a dream about Jesus or a vision of him, received a message from him, been granted favours, healings, new insights ...without any Christian preacher entering into their lives.

It may be that Christian storytellers at times feel alienated in their own country. If so, they need not blame somebody else. It happens because they have distanced themselves from the simplicity, directness and immediacy of the Gospel. They have erected walls of culturally alienating ideologies, acquired self-uprooting habits, planted into their lives sophisticated ego-claims; self-importance, prejudices and pretensions may have erected fortresses around them and dug ramparts to keep fellow-citizens at a distance. They have not noticed the God-hunger of their compatriots, their thirst for Christ. They have forgotten that "God was making all mankind his friends through Christ" (2 Cor 5:19).