Arasakumar Rayappan Mission In Contexts: Biblical Foundations for Plurality in Mission

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In every sphere of life, context or the situation is taken much more seriously today than ever in the past. Every biblical text needs to be interpreted taking its socio-political, cultural and canonical contexts into account. Equally important is the present context in which a particular text is interpreted. The author argues that the so-called 'Great Commission' of Mt. 28:19-20 has been misinterpreted without taking its contexts into account and without considering the other mission statements in the Bible. The Bible bears witness to plurality in mission and shows that the mission of the church flows from the mission of Christ and that in turn it flows from the mission of God - creation and liberation. Any activity that promotes life and freedom -peace building, developmental works, dialogue, etc. - should be considered as the integral part of the mission of the church. This has important lessons for the Indian church.

Introduction

The Sabri Kumbh (11-14 February 2006) in the Dangs of Gujarat. India among many other events and incidents in the recent history of our country in general and of the state of Gujarat in particular should make us rethink about our theology of mission. The speakers and organizers of the mega event of the Sabri Kumbh went to the extent of quoting the Bible to argue that what is going on in the Dangs, or even in the other parts of the country for that mater, in the name of mission and conversion is wrong. Morari Bapu, a well known Hindu leader and speaker, who has apparently tried to bring reconciliation between different communities in some places, quoted Mt. 23: 15¹ and said, "The Bible says that conversion by means of allurement is a sin and a person doing this and the person who gets converted would go to hell. I wish Christians follow the Bible."²

This should provoke a question within us: Are we really following the Bible when it comes to mission and evangelization?

In fact, the Hindu nationalists perceive the present mission of the church as a threat to the integrity of India's religious and cultural legacy. Further, as Satyavrata says, there is a "growing evidence in India of growing numbers of 'non-baptized believers in Christ,' who remain integrated within the Hindu community, yet believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour in accordance with the *istadevata* principle, or in even more orthodox terms." All these raise many serious questions regarding baptism. For example, should baptism be really an integral part of our mission or should it be our only goal? What do the scriptures say?

Many in the church, especially those who are not affected by what is happening in the missions, those who are in their cosy residences and offices, are still stuck to their old dogma on mission. However, the missionaries in the field who have become vulnerable in many ways and have become conscious of the plurality in reality, especially in the mission areas of Gujarat. Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, etc. are desperately in search of an alternative mission theology. People who are in responsible positions in the church - the leaders and the theologians - cannot be mere spectators. It is their duty to study and analyze the present situation and find a suitable model of mission that is inspired not merely by tradition but by the Scriptures. This article is an attempt towards such a goal - an attempt to browse through the pages of the Bible, though briefly, to find the roots of our mission.

Context ... Context ... Context

In every sphere of life context or the situation is taken more seriously today than ever in the past. For example, the context in which a person is born and is brought up is of immense importance to the psychologists and the counsellors. Similarly, to understand a religion - its function and mission -the sociopolitical and cultural context in which it is born and in which it grows as well as the context in which its message (scripture) is delivered, transmitted and written down is of paramount importance. Equally important is the present context in which those texts are interpreted. In other words, since we are dealing with the word of God which is alive and active, it should be interpreted taking today's situation seriously into account. After all, any valid interpretation of a text takes place in some particular context. Thus 'context, context, context' becomes the maxim for the biblical interpretation. In other words, to rip a biblical text from its contexts and to interpret it will be harmful.

No biblical text can be treated as the conclusive proof text for mission. The so-called "Great Commission" of Mt. 28: 19-20, for example, should be, first of all, studied in its own historical and canonical contexts. Secondly, since it is not the only mission statement in the Bible - Bible contains numerous such mission statements - it has to be studied along with other similar statements. We need to allow these statements to complement and even correct one another. Seeing from our present context, at least some of them are more important than Mt. 28: 19-20. Finally, there has to be a dialogue between our findings and our present context. Perhaps it is due to our negligence in paying due attention to the Scriptures or our misinterpretation of certain scriptural texts that has traditionally led us to give so much (undue?) importance to this text.

Problematic but Indispensable

As noted above, mission has become a contentious issue today. Many hate the very word "mission' and the traditional, pre-Vatican, colonial model of mission does not carry much weight any more. The underdeveloped and the developing countries, which have been the fertile land for such mission, have begun to assert their special identity - their religion, culture and institutions. A large number of the Christians live in this non-European, multi-cultural and multi-religious world where more than anything else, nationalism has become the decisive factor that decides the identity of the people. This is especially true of India where the *Sangh Parivar* has, to a large extent, succeeded in identifying *Hindutva* with nationalism and in convincing people not to accept anything (governance, religion, culture etc.) that is foreign. All these call for new models of mission that would have positive attitude towards the religion and culture of every people.

At the same time, from another point of view, the international borders are becoming redundant and the people are turning to be global citizens. There is greater need for the "ego's search for wholeness" (Eckhart Tolle). One needs to go beyond one's own belief system and religious identification. In the globalising world, if people are becoming politically and socially more and more aware of their basic oneness, it appears needless to emphasize our need to become religiously conscious of our interconnectedness. This is more so in India, which has produced great saints like Buddha who wished to be one with all, and also great traditions like that of 'Sufi-Saivite' traditions that believe that all humans are one.

This, however, should not make us dispense with our mission. "Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!", exclaimed St Paul (I Cor. 9:16). "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard", said Peter and John (Acts 4:20). No one who has truly experienced the goodness and love of God can be quiet. In other words, no one who has encountered Jesus Christ or has the personal experience of him can remain uncommitted to his mission. Human nature demands that what has been experienced to be good and true is shared. That was the experience of the great biblical figures like prophet Jeremiah who burst out, "If 1 say 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (Jer. 20:9).

What is true in the case of the individual Christian is also true for the corporate body, the church, which is the universal sacrament of salvation (LG 48). Just like the old Israel, the new Israelite community is also missionary by its very nature (AG 2) and every member of this community is called to mission (RM 90). This is well articulated by John Paul II when he says. "The task of missionary animation must continue to be a serious, consistent duty of every baptized person and of every ecclesial community." For Brennan, "The day the church ceases to be missionary, that day she ceases to be Catholic." God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (I Tim. 2:4) and being 'part of the body of Christ, mission is part of what we are.' 6

If mission and even the word 'mission' itself has become problematic, it is because of its connection with the colonial regime that committed grave sins against humanity. "... mission and evangelization, Westernization and colonization, have often gone hand in hand, producing mission theologies and practices as well as attitudes and approaches to other religious and cultural traditions that have come under serious criticism today ...".

In the colonial way of evangelization, the converted had to reject all those which were dear to him/her:

The colonial process of evangelization had two phases: first, converts were washed clean of their old identity of their parent religion, culture, and society. Second, faith in Jesus was imparted but not through a neutral medium. It was imposed through the concrete medium of the missionary's culture, social and religious identity. In the colonial model of evangelization, this process was not simply that a believer in Jesus had to die to his old self and put on Jesus Christ (Rom 6), but she/he had to be recast in the identity of the missionary, i.e., in the latter's culture, social genius and religious orientations.⁸

Realizing this fact, what we need to do now is to discover an alternative way of being church and a new way of being missionaries. A scripture based new language and methods of mission are the need of the hour. Following the prophetic footsteps of Pope John Paul II who, on behalf of the church asked pardon from many peoples for the sins of the past, we need to acknowledge, reject and correct the wrongs of the past and carry what is good in it to the future by expanding it at the same time. In the Indian context, we need a missionary model that will allow the Christians to be fully Christians yet Indians in every way - religiously, culturally, and socio-politically. Can the Scriptures provide such models?

Prophetic Statements on Mission

Already in 1962, in the context of the necessity of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII said that the church "must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world, which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate." There is no contention that the presence of certain conservative elements in the council had strong influence on its documents. To what else can we attribute the narrow understanding of mission as "the work of preaching the Gospel and implanting the Church among people who do not yet believe in Christ" (*AG* 6)? Nevertheless, mission is one of the areas where the council was very prophetic. The council did open the debate on the content and methods of mission, a debate that has inspired numerous speeches and writings on this topic since then. That the debate continues without any consensus or conclusion is not something that should discourage us. After all, such debate has, in fact, enhanced missiology. The only disheartening factor, if at all we consider it so. is that even after fifty years the positive developments in this arena are rather slow.

With a lot of wisdom, the council also agreed prophetically that the one mission of the church that originates in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit may not be exercised in the same way in all circumstances. To put it in the exact words of the council. "In each situation and circumstance a proper line of action and effective means should be adopted" (*AG* 6). Similarly Pope Benedict XVI counsels that the Good News has to be announced In efficient ways" in accord with "the historical situation in which men and women live today." It means that though the mission is one, the structures and methods will vary according to the context. Do the Scriptures support this contention? In my opinion, they do.

Bible in Its Context

History bears witness to the fact that Bible can be used either as an oppressive tool in the hands of the exploiters to subjugate and dehumanize others (e.g. justification of colonialism and exploitation of women) or as an instrument of hope, emancipation and liberation (e.g. the birth of liberation theology) in the hands of the exploited. It is only those who know the background of the biblical texts who can make use of them for the purpose of liberation.

One should be aware, for example, of the fact that these texts have originated sometimes totally in different situations and different times. That itself gives us a clue that there need to be plurality even in interpreting them in different contexts.

The God of the Bible speaks and acts according to the context. For instance, the very beginning of the letter to the Hebrews tells us that God uses different mediums at different times to communicate with us. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways" (Heb. 1:1-2). Similarly the sacred writers wrote in a determined situation of their time and culture (*DV* 12). Further, the biblical texts have had a long history of origin and transmission (oral) until they took their final shape in the form of books. During that long history, they underwent modifications at every stage so as to become relevant to new situations. This is specially so when they took their final written form. How else can we explain, for example, the fact that each evangelist presents a different variant of the mission mandate of the same risen Christ? What made them different from each other is their specific context. Each evangelist is reformulating/adapting/interpreting the words of Jesus to suit his specific situation. It is the community to which each one is writing with all its problems and questions that determine the texts. Barton explains this as follows:

Perhaps there is not all that much difference between calling Matthew, Mark, Luke and John redactors and calling them authors, since each writer adapted the material he had received in such a way as to impose his own characteristic stamp on it. The Lucan Jesus is in important ways different from the Matthaean one.... The best way to explain this might be to think of the two evangelists in question as having a different agenda in their own church setting, different problems to confront and different dangers against which to warn their readers.¹³

If this is the case of the Gospels, it is easy to imagine the interpretations and reinterpretations that might have taken place in the history of the OT texts. All this has a clear and very important message for us. While interpreting these 'sacred' texts or when we want to see their relevance to our present context, the specific context of each book, if not of each text within it. also needs to be taken into consideration.¹⁴ No text, no

statement (including the mission statements) can be taken on its face value. In other words, literal understanding of the texts will lead us to misrepresent the authors and even misinterpret the divine revelation.

Another important point that has to be kept in mind is that since the biblical texts address the questions and problems of their own times, we cannot expect them to directly address the problems of our day, be it globalization or genetic engineering. Nevertheless, they provide a certain orientation and inspiration to us who can, following the spirit of those texts, or the spirit of those involved in those texts (Moses, Jesus, Paul etc.), deal with the problems of our times. We need to reinterpret those texts in our contexts. In fact here Jesus himself sets a model for us when he says, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Mt. 19: 8). Jesus, the new Moses, does not imitate Moses or take his words literally but picks up his spirit and reinterprets his law in the new context; he adapts its to the new situation to make it relevant. Thus when Paul advises the women to cover their head (1 Cor. 11:6) or says that they are not permitted to speak in the prayer assemblies (I Cor. 14:34), we need to ask: What was the situation that forced him to do so? And what does it mean for us today when our women, who are also created in the image and likeness of God, are fighting for equality?

It is in this context what Vat II advices the interpreters of the biblical texts to pay due attention "to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer, and to the conventions which the people of his time followed in their dealings with one another" (DV 12). The same document further counsels us to take the 'unity of the whole of Scripture' seriously and adapt the biblical texts to new situations (DV 25). Again the church has stressed the importance of contextual reading of the Bible, because ultimately what is important is not the historical or literal meaning of the text but the meaning the text gets in the lives of the readers. ¹⁵

It is important to realize that no statement in any part of the Bible can be interpreted properly out of its literary or canonical contexts. That is, we need to see in which book and in which chapter that statement is situated (literary context). Then, we have to interpret it from the theological perspective of that book, because each book and, in fact, each text is a theological response of the people of that time to their context. Again, we have to look for similar and sometimes even opposing statements in the same book as well as in other books of the Bible and compare and contrast it with them (canonical context). In other words, we have to allow for a dialogue among similar and opposing texts and let them complement one another. We often forget, for example, that the same Jesus who said that he came to bring division or to set fire on earth (Lk 10:34; 12:49), also said that he came to bring reconciliation and peace (Jn 20:21-23).

Mission Texts in Their Contexts

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the whole Bible is a mission statement/mandate from God. Beginning with the first chapter of Genesis till the last chapter of Revelation, the Bible contains numerous texts that should be considered as the mission statements, which are either explicit or not so explicit. These texts are all coming from various people and various situations and are ultimately conditioned by their contexts. Thus, though they all eventually speak of the one mission of God, no two of them propose or inspire the same methods or ways of executing that mission. That is why it is of paramount importance that before we take up certain mission statements found in the Bible, we need to acknowledge that they are all. like other biblical texts, conditioned by their contexts - their socio-political, religious and historical settings.

It is also equally important to interpret each of them not as an isolated statement but as part of a particular book (literary context) and as part of the whole bible (canonical context). Speaking about the canonical approach to the study of sexuality, as an example. Donfried states as follows:

A canonical approach to the study of sexuality, guided by a Christological and Trinitarian hermeneutic, would need to examine all the relevant witnesses in the Old and the New Testament and then interpret each within the entire theological context of Scripture. The beginning point, therefore, must be to hear the complete witness of Scripture as a whole, to start and end with Romans 1 guarantees distortion. It is Scripture that forms Romans 1: 26-28 and not the other way around. Not only must one look at these witnesses both within the specific and the larger theological contexts in which they are found, but there must be attention to (a) the question of God's intention in creation with regard to sexuality, (b) what, biblically, is meant by sin. and (c) the quality of Christian existence "in Christ." 16

What Donfried has said with regard to the interpretation of Romans 1:26-28, can also be said of the so called Great Commission found in Mt 28 and Mk 16, "... the mission mandate of the risen Lord is not restricted to a few words abstracted from their context in Mt 28 or Mk 16. It should be understood in the context of the creative and saving purpose of the God of the poor as unfolded in the entire Bible." Here the observation of Wicked is significant:

... the last several verses of Matthew 28 cannot be dislodged from everything else and become the "Great commission." These verses only became a great commission at the end of the sixteenth century when Andre Saravia (1531-1613) used them to challenge the idea that mission to the ends of the earth no longer applied. They became the watchword for the modern missionary movement when William Carey interpreted Mathew 28 to urge European Christians to fulfil their obligation to go out into the world for "the conversion of the heathen." Today, this "great commission" needs to be interpreted alongside other New Testament commissions (for example, Mk 16 Lk 4 Jn 17) in order to rediscover the richness of our Christian heritage. ¹⁸

The whole Bible is a witness to the mission of God which he carries out through his Son. Certain historical developments in the past caused the narrow understanding of the Great Commission and elevated it to the most important missionary text in the Bible. What we need to do is to study all the relevant texts that speak of mission. However, at this juncture, given the scope of this article, this is an impossible task for us. All the same, by studying some important texts from different books, we can at least set a direction towards a proper understanding of the biblical notion of mission.

The Life-Giving Mission of God

The biblical texts dealing with mission can be generally grouped into three categories depending upon whether they deal with the mission of God or of Jesus or of our own mission. Since mission involves 'sending,' normally we think of God sending his Son to the world or the Son sending his disciples to the nations. Hardly is the fact of God sending or moving Himself to act is taken seriously. However, it is important to realise that the most important element in any mission is communicating the divine, sharing with others what God is and what God's plan is for the world. Mission aims at offering the true knowledge of God and his plans, a knowledge that will ultimately help us all to reach God. In this sense, the self-communication of God itself should be seen as mission even before we see Jesus revealing God and entrusting the same responsibility to the humans.

The creation accounts in the book of Genesis tell us that God, as a person, communicates with the world through the act of creation: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). The second verse with its expressions *tohuw wa bohuw* (formlessness, waste, confusion, emptiness, chaos) and 'darkness' emphatically drive home the message that God is moved by such a situation to bring order, life and light in the world. He sees that the universe is filled with life (vv. 11 & 22). This mission of life, this divine self-disclosure, reaches its climax when God creates humankind "in his image, likeness" (v. 27). He who observes his creation every day and finds it 'good' experiences it as 'very good' as soon as he creates the human beings. This is the first (divine) mission that we encounter in the Bible. However, the mission does not end there. God entrusts the same mission of creation to those whom He created in His image and likeness. The work of creation has to be continued and the creation has to become more and more beautiful through the work of the human beings. On the one hand, they have to increase and multiply and on the other, as the representatives of God, they have to govern/rule over (*radah* v. 28) the whole creation in the sense of tilling it or serving it (*'abad*) and preserving (*shamar* 2:15) it. This concept of continuing creation as mission is forcefully brought out by the command that God gives to Noah in 6: 19-21. Noah has to preserve every living being.

According to Brueggemann, "The two creation narratives, in very different modes, articulate that the world ... belonging to God, is formed and willed by God, is blessed by God with abundance, is to be cared for by the human creatures who are deeply empowered by God, but who are seriously restrained by God." There is scholarly consensus that the creation accounts took their final shape during the chaotic time of exile in the 6th century. What they emphasize is the notion that unlike the gods of other nations, especially that of Babylon, Yahweh creates effortlessly and his creative work consists in bringing order (to be seen in the orderly society of Israel) in place of chaos represented by Babylonian kingdom. Yahweh has made this world an orderly, hospitable, beautiful and viable place for life and the mission of the humans is to continue to preserve these characteristics of the cosmos until they reach the perfect creation - the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21).

God's mission of creation/life cannot be separated from his mission of redemption. This idea is powerfully articulated by texts like Is 40:28-31 and 45:12-13. Life cannot be fully lived if any disorder creeps into creation and creation becomes inhospitable. Yahweh not only creates the world and the humans but also gets involved in the life of the universe and of the human beings. He loves freedom and wills that his children live in freedom. Being the God of life. Yahweh takes the side of all who are enslaved in one way or the other - the poor, the exploited, the *dalits* and the marginalized. The following text from Exodus (3:7-10), forcefully brings out this point:

Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, ... The cry of the

Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." 22

Unlike in Genesis where God goes on the mission of creation, here he comes down on a mission to recreate his people - who have lost their identity as a people - through the act of deliverance (*natsal*²³ = to rescue, v. 8). This mission of God is aroused by his observance of what was happening to his people and by his hearing of their cries of agony. His observation and hearing has given him a true knowledge of their suffering (v. 7). Ex 2:43-45 tells us that the groaning of the Israelites reminds God of the promises of deliverance he made to their ancestors and moves him into action. Unable to digest the injustice done to his people, unable to bear the oppression and slavery of his children, he wants to take them to a land of freedom (broad land) and prosperity (flowing with milk and honey,²⁴ v. 8). On this great mission of freedom and deliverance, he decides 'to send' Moses who has 'to go' to Pharaoh, the oppressor. Just as he entrusted the mission of creation to the humans, here he entrusts the mission of salvation to the humans represented by Moses.

The main focus of the book of Exodus is the theological claim that God is present with and in the midst of his people. The Exodus talk of Israel, in fact, precedes their creation talk. Exodus was the primary and basic event where the Israelites experienced their God as the deliverer. If am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment (Ex. 6: 6). That is why Exodus became paradigmatic for their testimony about him. They began to see everything through the lens of this great experience.

The God of the Bible is the God of life. The RSV uses the phrase 'the living God' not less than 35 times (I Sam 17:26; Jer 23:36; Mt 16:16). Further, "He is God not of the dead, but of the living" (Mt 22:32). The bible begins and ends with this concept of life (Gen 1:3-4; Rev 21:4; 22: 5). The story of life in the Bible climaxes in the book of Revelation that depicts the consummation of creation, where there will be no darkness, suffering or death and the living God will reign forever (Rev 21 and 22). Whenever God observes that this life is affected, he sends his emissaries into the world (Moses, Jesus etc.) on the mission of life. The people whom he created are his children: they are the "children of the living God" (Hos 1:10; Rom 9:26). They need to be free from everything that hinders life - slavery, oppression, exploitation, violence, pain and suffering, injustice and inequality, and so on. As we shall see now, this exactly is the whole mission of Jesus, who is the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). Again, this should also be, according to the Bible, the mission of the church. Not only is it important that the cosmos is preserved with all its beauty but the human beings who are made in the image and likeness of God should live fully in freedom and liberty. Whenever that freedom is snatched away the important mission of deliverance has to be carried out. Protection of life and liberation from slavery, in whatever form it may exist, is the fundamental mission of Jesus and of the church. We have to coordinate our own mission with the mission of God fulfilling His aim in creation.

The Liberative Mission of Jesus

As we have noted above, creation and deliverance or redemption are the most fundamental aspects of the mission of God and everything else, including the mission of Jesus, must be based on and depend upon them. In fact creation and deliverance should not be seen as two different things. God, who creates everything in freedom and sets everything in freedom, delivers the creation or the creatures whenever they lose that freedom. It is his will that they all grow in freedom till they reach their fullness in the new creation. St. Paul expresses this truth in one of the most poignant texts that takes us back to Genesis and Exodus:

... the creation itself will be set free [eleutheroo: to make free, set at liberty] from its bondage (douleia: slavery), bondage] to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption [apolutrosis: redemption, deliverance] of our bodies (Rom 8:21-23).

It is towards this goal that Jesus, who is full of life and through whom all things came into being (Jn 1:3-4) enters this world and carries out his life affirming and liberative mission. Having been sent by the God of life (20:21), he sets people free from everything that dehumanizes them and restores their dignity as the children of God and promises them life in its fullness (3:15-16; 10:10),²⁹ "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (I Jn 4:9). In fact, for John, the purpose of writing the gospel is faith in Jesus that will ultimately give life³⁰ (20:31). So he uses various phrases and images like bread of life (6:35, 38) and living water (7: 37-39) to underscore the truth that Jesus came to give life to the world. In uncompromising terms Jesus asserts that he came to the world to do the will of the Father (5:30: 6:38; see 4:34). He also explains that the will of the Father is that no one or nothing is lost, that every one and every thing should get life (6:39-40).

What life or eternal life for John is what Kingdom of God is for the synoptics. Though the synoptic gospels differ among themselves in their theological perspectives, all three of them make Kingdom of God the centre

of Jesus' life and ministry.³¹ Coming at a desperate time of marginalization of certain sections of the society that were looked down upon especially by the so-called religious and pious people, and drawing vision and energy from his Abba experience, Jesus inaugurates the Kingdom of God which will be consummated at the time of his second coming. It is the reign of God where every one enjoys freedom, equality, acceptance, compassion, service and true peace and where life will flourish free from bondage.

According to Mark, after announcing the good news about the Kingdom of God in 1:15, Jesus calls some men to be his disciples and then till 2:13 he goes on liberating people from everything that dehumanizes them - all types of sicknesses and demoniacs. Since one who sins is the slave to sin (Jn 8:34), Jesus liberates people even from that slavery (2:5). He argues that life is more important than anything in the world (Mk 8:35-37). To his critics who are enraged because of his life giving works on the Sabbath, he poses a startling question to show that he is just continuing the work of his Father, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" (3:4). After all it is the will of the Father that nothing should die (see Mt. 18: 14). Pope John Paul II summarizes Jesus' works for the Kingdom when he says. "Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms" (*RM* 13).

The Nazareth Manifesto of Jesus explicates the mission of Jesus further, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. because he has anointed me to bring good news to the *poor*. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and *recovery* of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go *free*, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4:18-19)".

Commenting on this text Walker says. "As the centerpiece of God's action, Jesus declares that he redeems and turns the world upside down for those who have been abandoned, exploited, and burdened Jesus' proclamation of the good news of release, recovery, and liberty demonstrates the dominant transaction of God's salvific work within humanity ... ".32 Those who are living in inhuman conditions, those who are starving of food, health, love, compassion and acceptance draw the attention of Jesus. He feeds, heals, shows love and compassion, forgives and accepts and above all criticizes and breaks down the structures of oppression. For instance, he boldly addresses a woman and that too a bent and crippled woman as a daughter of Abraham (Lk. 13: 16) - a human person who deserved freedom and respect - and sets her free from all that had bound her for eighteen long years. Thus, Jesus makes a human world for everyone to live in. In a nutshell, we see that the mission of Jesus becomes the historical concretization of the mission of God. However, the ways and means that Jesus employs to carry out this mission of God differ according to the context in which he is placed.

The Empowering Mission of the Church

Jesus sends his disciples and to put it in his own words, "As the Father has sent me" (Jn. 20: 21). Can our mission be anything other than the mission of God or Jesus - promoting life and working for a world conducive to life and free from all that hinders it? Should not the church continue the work of creation and liberation? This may be a natural conclusion from what we have seen so far. This will also be the conclusion if we take all the mission commands in the Bible (starting from Genesis) seriously. Nonetheless, because of our faith formation so far, what crops up in our minds as soon as we think of our mission or the mission of the church is "the Great Commission in Mt 28:19-20". Unfortunately, so far, a fundamentalist interpretation of this text has guided the mission of the church.³²

The document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church'³⁴ describes the way the biblical books have come into existence and warns against any such literal interpretation. It is worth mentioning some of the important points made by this document:

- 1. The fundamentalist interpretation "excludes every effort at understanding the Bible that takes account of its historical origins and development" (No. 1809).
- 2. It promotes "a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research" (No. 1811).
- 3. "It fails to recognize that the Word of God has been formulated in [human] language and expression conditioned by various periods ... bearing the mark of very diverse historical situation" (No. 1812).
- 4. It "confuses the final stage of this tradition (what the evangelists have written) with the initial (the words and deeds of the historical Jesus)" (No. 1815).

Without going into the details of the history of the interpretation of Mt 28:19-20, it can be said that it has been interpreted in the fundamentalist way understanding it literally as the statement made by Jesus of history. However, studies and researches made in the gospel of Mathew³⁵ show us that this is not so. Mathew is writing to a community which was in serious identity crises. Because of its faith in Jesus, it was losing its Jewish identity. On the other hand, in the absence of the new Jewish converts, it was trying to woo more gentile converts. The text of Mt. 28: 19-20 is put in the mouth of Jesus in defense of the gentile mission, in

defense of the need for conversion to increase the number in the Christian community. In the same spirit, our mission in the past has been very much directed to strengthening "our" religion and conquering or making inroads into other religions.³⁶

According to Mt 10:5-15 and 10:34-39, the mission of the disciples is nothing other than the mission of Jesus himself³⁷ - announcing the Kingdom of God through words and works of love and compassion (Mt 9:35-38). However in the changed circumstances, Mt 28:19-20 emphasizes the need to enlarge the community and assures the continual presence of Jesus in it. The focus of Ch 10 is the Kingdom and its values like peace³⁸ that promote human life, but the focus of Ch 28 is the identity of the Christian community and its growth and security. Though such a mission could be justified in the contemporary context of that time, it cannot be indiscriminately applied always and everywhere. Since God is the author and initiator of mission, the goal of mission cannot be just church but should shift from the church to the Kingdom. Ultimately, we need to fall back on the mission of God and that of Jesus for inspiration, guidance and strength in our complex contemporary contexts.

Often the Bible speaks also directly about the mission of the human beings on earth. First of all we need to study those 'mission statements.' We need also to analyze the situation in which we are as Yahweh does in Ex 3:7.³⁹ Only then can we choose the right method of doing that one mission of God in a relevant way. According to Genesis God commands that the human beings become fruitful, multiply, fill the universe and rule over it as he himself rules over (Gen 1:28). Further, they have to cultivate God's creation and preserve it (Gen 2:15). When a group of his sons and daughters are in slavery God sends Moses and Aaron to "let my people go" and to "celebrate" their life with God who gave them life (Ex 5:1). When sociopolitical and religious structures begin dehumanizing the world and his children, he sends prophets⁴⁰ and other servants to "pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow" the structures of oppression and "to build and to plant" the structures that promote life and freedom (Jer 1:10). They are also to bring glory to God by becoming "light to the nations" (witnessing) and by bringing his people who are scattered back to him (reconciliation, Is 49:5-6), and "bring forth justice to the nations" (Is 42:1-4).⁴¹ Through all these means the salvation has to reach the ends of the earth. Jesus, in his new context, fulfills all this by inaugurating, proclaiming and promoting the values of the Kingdom of God and commands his disciples to continue his mission till its consummation, the new heaven and new earth.

What does all this mean for us Indians who live in a pluralistic society with problems and structures that are dehumanizing the majority of the children of God created in his image and likeness? What are the methods, ways and means, we need to adopt to fulfill the one mission of God and Jesus Christ in our peculiar context? Without going into details, at this juncture, we can only state our mission in a summary form in the words of our bishops:

Given the pluralistic fabric of the Indian society we need to recognize a pluralistic approach to mission. The paths of interreligious dialogue, liberation of the poor, transformation of the society according to the values of the Gospel, inculturation of the Church and evangelization of cultures, services through various types of institutions, promotion of the integrity of creation are all to be understood as legitimate and valid, important and urgent for the realization of the one and the same mission.⁴²

Conclusion

The Bible presents promotion of life as the only mission of God and Jesus but demonstrates various ways of carrying out that mission in diverse contexts. The Vatican document on the mission of the church terms the work of preaching the Gospel and implanting the church among people who do not yet believe in Christ as the narrow understanding of mission and states that the mission of the church should receive its specification from the context in which it is exercised (*AG* 6). The church, in fact, believes that she can and she should contribute greatly towards making the world, and in fact, the whole of creation more human (see *LG* 40-41; *GS* 40). In the Indian context, where thousands and millions of the children of God are bound by unjust and exploitative religious, socio-cultural and political structures and are dehumanized because of ecological degradation, the all embracing, liberative and prophetic mission of Jesus as depicted in Lk 4:16-18 should become the mission of all those who are anointed by the Spirit of God through baptism. Mission, in our context, is therefore a complex activity comprising of witnessing, human liberation, emancipation of the *dalit* groups, dialogue, inculturation, promotion of ecological awareness and so on. Can we do all this without networking with the people of other religions and the NGOs who are all working towards the goal of humane world where life can blossom?

8

Notes

- "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves".
- H. Pandya, "Danes Doctrine", Sunday Times of India, Ahmedabad: (12 February 2006), 4. See also G. Shaw, "Dangni Shānti Pâdarionā hathman", Sandesh (weekly supplement), Vadodara (12 February, 2006), 1.
- Ivan Satyavrata, "The experience of Hindu Christian converts in the pre-independence period and the Christian witness in contemporary India", Religion and Society, Vol. 48. No. 3 (Sept. 2003), 21.
- John Paul II. Message for the 77th World Mission Day, 6.
- ⁵ J.P. Brennan, *Christian Mission in a Pluralistic World*, Bombay: 1991, 96.
- ⁶ As quoted by P.L. Wickeri, "Towards a Kenosis of Mission: Emptying and Empowerment for the Church and for the World", Scripture, Community and Mission (Essays in Honour of D.P. Niles) (ed.), P.L. Wickeri, Hong Kong: 2002, 332. Ibid., 333.
- ⁸ A. Karokaran, "Mission: An Alternative Model". *Third Millennium* III (2000), 1, 33-34.
- ⁹ Pope John XXIII, "Opening Speech to Second Vatican Council" (delivered on 1 October 1962 in St. Peter's Basilica), The Documents of Vatican II (ed.), W.M. Abbot, N.Y., 1966, 714.
- Pope Benedict XVI. Address to the Staff of La Civiltà Cattolica. VATICAN CITY: (17 February 2006). infoenglish@zenit.org.
- For a simple but basic reading on the history of the biblical books, see J. Barton, How the Bible Came to Be. Louisville: 1997, especially Ch. 2 on Writing the Books.
- See Mt 28:19-20: Mk 16:15-16; Lk 24:47: Jn 20:21-23.
- ¹³ Barton. *Ibid*., 21 -22.
- ¹⁴ Among many other factors that need to be taken into consideration while interpreting biblical texts, the prominent ones are the literary genre of the text and the literary and canonical contexts of the text. However, this being a short study, we shall limit ourselves to the historical, literal and canonical contexts of the text.
- The Pontifical Biblical Commission. "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church", Vatican City: 1993. I.E.
- ¹⁶ K.P. Donfried. "Alien Hermeneutics and the Misappropriation of Scripture". *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (edsj.
- C.E. Braaten and R.W. Jenson. Edinburgh: 1996. 34-35).

 17 "The Challenges to Christian Mission Today: Consolidated Report of the CCBI Consultation", *Ishvani Kendra*. Pune: Ishavani Kendra. 4-6 December 1999. and Third Millennium III (2000). 1. 99-106.
- P.L. Wickeri. Ibid., 338.
- ¹⁹ See J.NJ. Kritzinger. "The Function of the Bible in Protestant Mission". *Scripture. Community, and Mission*. 37.
- ²⁰ W. Brueggemann. *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, Louisville: 2003, 31.
- ²¹ For a detailed study of creation texts, see W. Brueggemann. Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy, Minneapolis: 1997, 145-164, especially 146 & 153.
- Emphasis in all the biblical texts are my own.
- ²³ Literally 'to snatch away' involving, often in OT. some violence. See for example. I Sam 17:37: Amos 4:11.
- ²⁴ This phrase occurs about 20 times in the OT to refer to the plenty of the promised land. See J.I. Durham. *Exodus*. Word Biblical Commentary. Texas: 1987).
- ²⁵ See J.I. Durham. *Exodus*, xxi.
- ²⁶ See W. Brueggemann. *Theology*. 178.
- ²⁷ See for example how the passing of Jordan in Jos. 4: 22-24. See also I Sam. 4:8:6:6.
- ²⁸ Between the Genesis and the Revelation texts given here, the imagery of light, which is one of the most important symbols, occurs about 200 times mainly to denote life (See L. Ryken el. Al (eds). Dictionary of Biblical Imagery. Illinois: 1998.509a.
- On the concept of abundant life in the Gospel of John, see G. Mlakuzhyil, Path to Abundant Life in the Gospel of John:
- A Guide to Study, Prayer, Preaching and Retreat. Delhi: 2005.

 30 It is worth noting that among the NT books, the Gospel of John has the highest number of occurrences of the word z.oe which refers to life both on earth and in heaven: Jn 3:9, Rom 2, Rev 20, Lk 15, Mt 14, Mk 9. The phrase eternal life occurs 17 times in Jn as against 3 times in Mt and Lk and 2 times in Mk.
- 31 See B.I. Vempeny, "God's Kingdom vis-à-vis World Family". The Church in India in the Emerging Third Millennium, (ed). T. D'Sa. Bangalore: 2005, 664. For a good exposition on the Kingdom of God. see "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society". The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society (ed.), D. S. Amalorpavadas. Bangalore: 1981. 589-608.
- 32 T.W. Walker, Luke: Interpretation Bible Studies, Louisville: 2001, 26.
- 33 It is interesting to note that a growing number of scholars prefer the shorter reading of 'the Great commission' ("Make disciples in my name") which does not contain the triadic formula.
- 34 Pontifical Biblical Commission. "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (21 September 1993). The Church and the Bible: Official Documents of the Catholic Church (ed.). D. J. Murphy. Bangalore: 2001.
- 35 For the summary account of the mission of Jesus, see Mt 9:35-38. For the survey of researches in Matthew and for the following discussion, see M. Irudayaraj. Learning from the Bible to Do Contextual Theology (unpublished doctoral thesis written under the guidance of P. Meagher. Delhi. 2005) Vol. 2 Chapter 5, especially pp. 288-297 and 424-428.
- 36 See M. Amaladoss. "A Paradiem Shift." at http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/ resources/sedos amal.htm.
- 37 A comparative stuck of these texts with Lk 9:1-6: 10:1-12 will be of great value at this juncture. However, this short study of ours will not allow space for that.
- 38 The Greek word used in Mt 10:13 Irene can mean tranquility, harmony, security, safety and prosperity.
- 39 The three Hebrew verbs predicated of Yahweh here show the intensity of Yahweh's sensitivity to the dehumanising situation of the Israelites and his identification with them: ra'ah (diligently observe, perceive), 'shama' (hearken, understand, diligently discern) and ycidcT (know, perceive, experience).

- 40 For a detailed study on the mission of the prophets see in this same issue of Third Millennium. P. Kalluveettil. "The Prophetic Vision on Mission: The Challenging and Abnegating Dimensions."
- 41 Note the use of the term justice 3 times in this text. The Hebrew word *mishpat* means what is due to one by divine or human law or by the law of nature. Thus, doing justice means giving to one what is due to him/her as the child of God created in his image and likeness. Is 42:1-4 with its cosmic outlook, places accent on the mission to the weak and the marginalized.
- 42 "CBCI Message on Mission in India Today" (Delhi, 25 February 2 March 1994), in D.H.R. De Souza. ed., *Final Statements of the General Body Meetings of C.B.C.I* (1966-2002) (ed.), New Delhi: 2003, 142.
- 43 See FABC Final Statement, All Asia Conference on Evangelization, Suwon, Korea, 24-31 August 1988 . See also Redemptoris Missio 17 and 52-59.

Ref.: Third Millennium, IX(2006)2, April-June, pp. 27-44.