

Prof. Joseph Pathrapankal C.M.I. Christian Evangelisation in the Context of Religious Pluralism

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The only thrust of Jesus' mission and ministry was the kingdom of God, which he opened to the whole world and all generations of peoples, irrespective of caste, class, nationality, cultural specificities or religious distinctions. Thus the mission of Jesus was not aimed at mere religious conversion but conversion into the reign of God, making everybody the children of God. Jesus presented God as his Father, Abba of benevolent love and mercy and the one eager to heal everybody for realising their integral liberation. The missionary programme of Jesus was entirely different from the later traditional missionary programme of the Church, which presented itself as the only God-given path under the sky for the salvation of the souls. Bearing witness to Christ, proclaiming the kingdom of God and its values, commitment to justice, peace and freedom, dialogue between peoples of various religious traditions, inculturation, inter-culturation, and caring for the ecological concerns of this planet earth, all seem to belong to the parameters of a holistic mission theology in our times if we go back into the missionary charism of Jesus and his disciples. Today the Church has to play the role of a servant in the same way, as Christ was a servant who came not to be served but to serve and give his life for the salvation of the whole world.

The Apodictic Reality of Pluralism

We are living in an increasingly pluralistic world. Humankind is also becoming more and more aware of its presence in this pluralistic world. Hence all are being invited to develop within them a healthy pluralistic thinking and approach to all realities. There is a rich variety of pluralism, such as ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious pluralism. Pluralism, as such, means the acceptance of the other as the other with all its distinctiveness. Basic to pluralistic thinking is the need and urgency of accepting and respecting the other with all its uniqueness, not as something opposed to oneself or as an extension of oneself, but as something with its own inalienable qualities and characteristics. Pluralism also involves the concept of the one and many, the one as basic to all things, coordinating the many, and the many as being coordinated to the one, thereby creating harmony and peace among the many. Hence pluralism means difference and also distinction, but it is not divisiveness and opposition. As a result, a pluralistic world does not mean a divided world. Once pluralism is accepted as a basic reality of this world and its historical process at all levels, it becomes easier for all to see the legitimacy of the other to exist and operate at various levels of life, and also the positive role pluralism plays in enriching the world as it is. It is this richness of pluralism that reveals the beauty of our human community as a whole, because God has created a world characterized by its own pluralism at various levels.

The Church and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism

One of the most important challenges the Church is facing in our times is the reality of religious pluralism. World Religions are beginning to realize that their future does not consist in any kind of isolation, confrontation, or domination of one over the other, but in their readiness and openness to accept and respect each other and also to reach out to the other. Those who are involved in the study of religions are also becoming more and more convinced that any attempt of one religion to dominate or monopolize in the realm of religions is self-defeating. There is no question of religious absolutes. Equally excluded is the tendency to establish one's own religion as something normative for the whole humankind. As a matter of fact, the most important challenge the Church faces in our times is the challenge of religious pluralism. Hence religious pluralism deeply affects the Church's self-understanding and her mission in the world. There is no more question of understanding Christianity in terms of uniqueness, exclusivism and superiority over other religions. These observations have been made precisely to examine the inner meaning of the theory and praxis of the mission of the Church in our times within the context of this challenge of religious pluralism. Can we hold on to some traditional concepts about the Church and carry on its mission without any reference to what is happening in the rest of the world? Are we entirely liberated from the colonial thinking and its persisting complexities? Do we need a shift of emphasis in some of the practices of the Church in order to improve the quality and the credibility of its mission in the world?

The *Mission Command* and the Church

It has been customary in the past history of the Church to analyse and interpret the entire theology of its mission on the basis of a specific text in the Gospel of Mathew (Mt 28:16-20). Technically, this text was known as the "Great Commission" or the "Great Command", namely, a commission and a command given by the risen Jesus to his immediate disciples about what they have to be doing after the ascension. Jesus is said to have told them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:18-20). When this text was linked to another commission of the risen Lord, found in the longer ending of the Gospel of Mark, the implications for the mission command became more crucial and demanding, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:15-16). Hence the Church took upon itself its duty and obligation to send its missionaries all over the world, in order to make all humans disciples of Jesus Christ, and baptize them and make them members of the Church in view of saving their souls. This is precisely what we have inherited as the background and rationale of the colonial mission from the West.

Here we should have a closer look at the entire theology of the Gospel of Mathew. Insofar as Mathew is to be understood as a didactic and ecclesial gospel, the author had to conclude it with a catechetical and didactic note, and that is what we have in the conclusion of this Gospel in Mathew 28:16-20, which is the only post-resurrection narrative, taking place in Galilee, the centre of Jesus' teaching ministry. In fact, Jerusalem as the important scene of the resurrection is left out in this Gospel in order to focus the attention on Galilee, and that too, on the mountain, wherefrom Jesus was giving his solemn teaching about radical discipleship (Mt 5:1-7,29).¹ Moreover, while the other evangelists and the Acts of the Apostles refer to the ascension of the risen Jesus, through which the emphasis on the earthly presence of Jesus is terminated. Mathew makes a solemn announcement about Jesus' continued presence in the world till the end of the ages (Mt 28:20). In the context of these specific characteristics of this post-resurrection narrative in the Gospel of Mathew, it seems that the focus of this last section is not so much on the worldwide mission of the disciples and the Church in view of making more and more disciples, as on reinstating the entire teaching ministry of Jesus and its transmission to his immediate disciples. The "making of the disciples", which is presented here as the main activity of the disciples of Jesus, is to be understood not as recruiting new members for the Church, but as the ongoing transmission of his teaching about the kingdom of God, and the consequent transformation of the entire humankind through that teaching. What we usually understand as the mission of the Church and its ongoing activities in the world is to be seen within the larger context of this specific mission of Jesus of Nazareth entrusted to his immediate disciples.

But what has happened with this text is something entirely different from what it originally meant. In missionary circles for the past several centuries much of the discussion about Mathew has been obfuscated by the high prominence given to the significance and interpretation of this so-called "Great Commission" (28: 18-20).² But in earlier times New Testament scholarship appeared to have been, as a whole, very little interested in this passage. As a matter of fact, (Mt 28:18-20) became a basic text for mission theology only from the 16th century onwards. The early Church took this passage as a directive given only to the immediate disciples of Jesus.³ According to Ulrich Luz, it was through William Carrey, the English Baptist, and through his writing in 1792, "An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of Heathens" that this text in Mathew became the *Magna Carta* of the mission of the Church. According to William Carrey, the command given in Mt 28:19a is a universal, absolute and all-time command, and so also is the assistance of the risen Christ in Mt 28:20b about his continued presence. Moreover, Carrey understood mission more in terms of obedience to God's command than as a response to God's love. Hence, the great mission command in Mathew was the rationale around which the theory and praxis of the mission of the Church were being built up during the past few centuries. Though this text refers to the authority, which the risen Jesus has been given, it was spontaneous on the part of the Church and its missionaries to presume that this same authority was given to them also to do all what they wanted with the proclamation of the Gospel and the conversion of the people. Since there was no one to challenge and question this usurpation of authority, it got established through the centuries, and that, too, with the assistance of the colonial powers.

As a consequence of this new emphasis on this text in the Gospel of Mathew in the Protestant circles, Roman Catholic theology also began to concentrate on this passage as central to its mission theology and praxis. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Mt 28:19-20 is referred to as the key text for the missionary task of the Catholic Church. It could even be said that in the ongoing and conflicting attempts of the various Churches and Christian denominations to expand themselves, this text from Mathew has been used as a convenient and powerful passage to reinforce and enlarge their own ecclesial and denominational boundaries under the pretext of a so-called "divine command", an expression sometimes having an aggressive as well as a military nuance. The truth is that the multi-religious world of ours cannot any more appreciate such expressions, such as

"command" and "commission" coming from religious circles. This is precisely what we may call a post-colonial mind-set with its psycho-sociological and military overtones.

The above mentioned mission command was also linked to Paul's rabbinic argument about the whole process of salvation as something ultimately based on preaching, faith and its confession of 'Jesus as the Lord', which insisted on the need of the proclamation of the Gospel and also the importance of the preachers for such a proclamation of the Gospel, inviting people to believe and make their confession of faith (Rom. 10: 9-15). With such ready-made biblical texts as the basis of a theology and its praxis, missionaries of all sorts went around the world baptizing millions and making them Disciples of Christ, thereby assuring them eternal salvation. In course of time other biblical texts were added to the mission command in order to reinforce and substantiate the intensity of the praxis of mission. They were mainly Christological texts from the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline writings, which presented Christ as the unique and universal mediator of salvation for the whole humankind. Thus we have Peter's solemn statement before the Jewish Council, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among humans by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). So also a passage from I Tim 2:5 was employed as a text as demonstrating the universal significance of Jesus Christ, "There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself to win freedom for the whole humankind". But what we have in these texts are faith proclamations made by those who already believed in Christ, and for whom they were absolute and binding statements. So we cannot take these statements out of the context in which they were written and make them metaphysically valid theological statements, as if they are binding for all humans. From the fact that it was so understood and taught for several centuries by Christian missionaries and nobody questioned it, it does not follow at all that therefore we can and have to somehow defend it. We are living in changed times in a multi-religious world. As a matter of fact, no religion should make absolute claims of any sort. Christian faith does not warrant it. It is not a question of any "relativization" of Christian theology, as some would put it in place and out of place. Rather it is the acceptance of a basic truth that is fundamental to the theology of religion and religious pluralism. We are all pilgrims on the way and, as such, no religion possesses the whole and absolute truth.

If the above-mentioned text from Mathew, supported by some other New Testament texts, was the all-important and exclusive one for understanding the mission of the Church, what about the many other texts in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus is said to have sent out the Twelve and the Seventy for announcing the kingdom of God, for healing the sick and for driving out the demons and, above all, for bringing peace to the people?⁴ In particular, Luke with his universal vision of the mission of Jesus has taken extra care to understand the mission of the Twelve broadening itself into a universal mission, but having the same objectives as in the mission of the Twelve (Lk 10:1-9). The whole question of "making disciples" of any kind is excluded from these missions. In fact, what we have in the mission of these disciples is the continuation of the mission of Jesus, the ongoing articulation of what Jesus himself did in response to the mission he received from God in the form of preaching the values of the kingdom of God and making people enjoy the blessings of that kingdom. It simply means that mission in the New Testament is to be understood from a broader and larger perspective as renewing and transforming the world through the power of the Gospel and the values of the kingdom of God. The Church had enough of proselytising mission in the past, and now we have to turn our eyes to the future with our eyes open and our hearts widened, and develop a new and relevant theology of mission and evangelization.

The Vision and Mission of Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is very often presented as the Founder of Christianity, whose teaching the Church is following. But if we objectively analyse the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, it becomes clear that he is not the founder of a religion like other founders. Jesus of Nazareth had to carve out a new group of followers from the very religious reality, of which he was a member in every aspect of that word. But he never tried to make this reality a new religion out of the parent religion, much less a new sect. It is true that later on the group comprising his disciples was called the "sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5) by some others, similar to the sect of the Sadducees (Acts 5:17). This mentality had also far-reaching consequences for the future of the Christian movement, when Stephen had to step in and fight for its trans-sectarian characteristics. But for the New Testament writers themselves Jesus was far from being the founder of a religion or the leader of a sect. For Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, the Christian movement was *the Way* (*he hodos*) (Acts 9:2), a way of living and acting. Hence he presents Paul making a solemn declaration of this conviction in his self-defence before Felix, where his own conviction about the Way is contrasted with the prevailing thinking about the sect that was current among others, both Christians and Jews. Paul tells Felix, "This I admit to you, that according to *the Way*, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets" (Acts 24:14). In fact, Jesus of Nazareth inaugurated a new way of living the vertical and horizontal dimensions of religion without at the same time founding a new religion. A recent work of John P. Meier about Jesus as a marginal Jew⁵ has raised several interesting observations about the so-called religious identity of Jesus of Nazareth and his relation to Judaism as a whole. Since Jesus was born and brought up in the

territory of Galilee, which was technically known as the Galilee of the Gentiles (Mt. 4: 15), he could not and did not belong to the category of those, for whom the Law of Moses was the ultimate norm and controlling factor of religious identity. The Jews living in this part of the world were surrounded by a fair number of Greeks and were also exposed to a good amount of Hellenistic culture and world vision. Consequently, these Jews would adhere only to the basics of their religion and religious practices. More than that, they were also prepared to see and appreciate goodness and virtue not only among their fellow humans, but also among the followers of other religious traditions. So it was quite natural that Jesus could appreciate goodness and a meaningful faith in the centurion who went to Jesus seeking healing from him for his servant who was lying paralysed at home. Jesus was spontaneous in offering assistance to him. The faith of the centurion was very profound so much so that his words have been immortalized in the celebration of the Eucharist all over the world, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed" (Mt 8:8). The words of Jesus are also unparalleled, "Truly, I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 8:11-12). Hence Jesus, remaining the member of a religion, was broadening the horizons of religions.

The same can be said about Jesus' attitude towards the Samaritans who were, in general, disliked and hated by the Jews. In the parable of the Good Samaritan it is a Samaritan who turns out to be the ideal one, for he proves by his action what it means to be a neighbour in the true sense of the word. As a Jew, Jesus also should have hated him; but as one with a capacity to transcend the mere human dimensions, he praised him and presented him as an example for the Jewish scholar who had approached him with the question, "Who is my neighbour?" For Jesus it was not an issue of dealing with an academic question, but of putting things into action. So Jesus said, "Go and do likewise!" (Lk 10:37). The same truth is once again affirmed in the story of the ten lepers, of whom one was a Samaritan, and he came back to thank Jesus for the favour he had received (Lk 17:11-19). The story of Jesus going to Galilee through Samaria and meeting the Samaritan woman and through her the whole community of the Samaritans is yet another challenging story in the Gospel of John. It was the custom and tradition among the Jews from Galilee to avoid going through the territory of the Samaritans when they went to Jerusalem, and for that purpose they had to undertake a round about journey from the north to the south and then from the south to the north. The understanding was that the Jews from Galilee should not pass through Samaria. The Samaritans themselves were not welcoming such movements of the Jews through their territory. It was part of the persisting hostility and hatred between the two communities for several centuries.

The author of the Fourth Gospel should have been fully aware of this custom and regulation when he wrote the story of Jesus going to Galilee through Samaria. All the same, he wrote it in bold words. "He (Jesus) left Judea and started back to Galilee. *But he had to go through Samaria*" (Jn 4:3-4). How could he write? "He had to go through Samaria"? The real issue was this, "He should not have gone through Samaria", if he were to respect the customs of his people. It seems that John was using a prophetic expression about transcending the barriers and enlarging the horizons when he was using this statement at the beginning of this story. In fact, the conclusion of the story takes us the readers to arrive at this conclusion. In his discussion with the Samaritan woman Jesus spells out his profound convictions about what religion and worship basically mean. In fact, this story encourages us to approach the challenge of religious identity in our times with an open mind (Jn 4:21-24). What Jesus told the Samaritan woman could be understood as an epitome of religion and worship, not only for the Jews and the Samaritans of his times, but also for the followers of all religions, then as well as now. This could be summarized as follows: In the past, the followers of various religious groups had their own ways of worshipping God, often in the context of rivalry and competition. But from now on, religion itself and worship, in particular, have to assume a new meaning and a new expression. Worship is no more to be localized and monopolized by a few people who think that they are the privileged and authorized ones, from whom all others have to learn and practice the essentials of worship. Rather, worship must be the exercise of the freedom of the spirit for all humans wherever and whenever they are. All what happened in the past in the history of Judaism and Samaritans were expressions of rivalry and competition, either the one claiming superiority over the other, or the one condemning the other as false and illegitimate. The time has now come for all to rise up from such religious enslavement and inaugurate a new era of worship with the power of the genuine operation of the Spirit of God, which is encompassing the universe of faiths and religious traditions. The inbuilt dynamics of the story of Jesus passing through Samaria and speaking to a Samaritan woman assumes greater importance when we come towards the later events in that story where the woman invites the villagers to go and meet this person and experience his challenging personality. The questionable ethical background of the woman is no hindrance for her becoming a powerful medium of taking a religious message to her own people, which she did with a sense of persuasion. The outcome of this new stage in the drama is that the entire village of the Samaritans got enchanted with the elevated personality of Jesus. As a result, many Samaritans from that city believed in him. Moreover, they requested Jesus to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. Many more believed because of his word. It means that during the two days he stayed with

them he continued to tell them about enlarging the horizons of their myopic approach to religion. Their final proclamation of faith stands as a crowning of the whole story, "We know that this truly the Saviour of the World (Jn 4:42). It is important to note how the Samaritans made their confession of faith about Jesus as the Saviour of the world, and not only of the Samaritans. It means the Samaritans themselves were empowered to transcend their own religious identity and see things from a wider and cosmic perspective.

Official Judaism would have regarded such a teaching as nothing less than heresy, and the meaning of what Jesus told the Samaritan woman was much more crucial than what is contained in his saying about the Temple of Jerusalem. "Destroy this temple; and in three days I will build it again" (Jn 2:19). In fact, Jesus had to get involved in a prophetic task far greater than that was assigned to the prophet Jeremiah, "Today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer 1:10). Jesus of Nazareth had a prophetic task of destroying and overthrowing certain inbuilt ideologies about religion and religious identity, and this was also part of his mission of inaugurating the kingdom of God as a universal situation of vertical and horizontal relationship. Biblical exegetes are called upon to explore this aspect of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth in a more radical manner during these changed times of human history. It is more a question of broadening the dimensions of their theological reflection and hermeneutical fields. "Widen the space of your tent, extend the curtains of your home. Do not hold back! Lengthen your ropes, make your tent-pegs firm, for your will spread out to right and to left" (Is 54:2-3). It is in these words that Deutero-Isaiah exhorted the returnees from the exile to go out of their introverted world vision and enlarge the horizons of their thinking. This exhortation is very much applicable to the theologians and exegetes of our times who are also challenged to go out of their centripetal world of theological reflection to the wider world of God. In a global village of ours it is only natural that the world of theologians and exegetes come closer and share their concerns and problems and this will add beauty and meaning for their theological ministry.

Christian Witnessing as Evangelization

It is in this context that we try to analyse the inner dynamism of another New Testament text, which uses a more dynamic and relevant language to articulate the mind of the risen Christ about what his disciples have to be doing, once his historical presence has come to an end through his ascension. Here we have a mission directive which is clearer, more relevant and also more demanding. This crucial and important text is given in the very beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, and it can be said that it is also the summary of the entire theology of the Acts of the Apostles. Since the Acts of the Apostles is a unique book in the New Testament with its accent on the origin and growth of the Church during the first century of the common era, it has something definitive and convincing to give to the Church of all times. Here we have the picture of a Church that has its origin and *élan vital* in the power of the Spirit of the risen Christ. The Acts of the Apostles is rightly called a "Missionary Document" insofar as this is the only New Testament document that describes the movement of the Gospel from Jerusalem into the wide Roman Empire. Written as a theological history, the book combines and synthesizes historical data and the theological insights of the author.

A unique characteristic of this book is that the author has succeeded in presenting his work as a systematic and ongoing articulation of a major theological theme introduced at the very beginning of the book, and it is carried on till the end. We would call it the theme of witnessing as the main task of the disciples of Jesus. Taking for granted that this is the second of a two-volume work written by Luke, namely, the third Gospel and the Acts, the gospel had already announced the mission of the disciples as witnessing, when the risen Christ told them, "You are witnesses of these things" (Lk 24:47). In fact, Luke 24:47-49 and Acts 1:4-8 present parallel accounts of Jesus' pre-ascension commission to the disciples.⁶ It is important to bear in mind that the evangelist, already at this stage, wanted to qualify the dynamism of this witnessing by associating it to the power of the Spirit. Hence we read, "I am sending upon you what my Father has promised: So stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:49). Whereas the English word "witness" is closely associated with a legal use, both in common practice and in biblical language, its Greek equivalent *martys* is often related to suffering which is involved in bearing witness to one's faith even to the point of death, commonly known as martyrdom. But in the Acts of the Apostles the word "witness" has a much broader and comprehensive meaning, from which the concept of martyrdom as a violent suffering grew up at a later date. It seems that the contribution made by Luke to the concept and inner meaning of witnessing is something we have to take more realistically than technically.

Consequently, Luke has taken special care to dwell on the importance of the witnessing mission of the disciples. Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses (*martyres*) in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end (*eschaton*) of the earth" (Acts 1:8). In fact, this text also serves as a compendium of the entire Acts of the Apostles until the witnessing ministry of Paul would reach Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire (Acts 28:30-31). Hence, it is also a prophetic statement about the ongoing mission of the Church till the end of history. Whereas in the Synoptic Gospels the mission of the

disciples was to preach the kingdom of God and to bring the blessings of the kingdom to the people, here it is made more concrete insofar as the disciples have to become the witnesses of Christ who through his resurrection has emerged as the embodiment of the kingdom of God in this world. Moreover, this witnessing is both chronological and geographical process: Starting from Jerusalem and going as far as the end of the inhabited earth, meaning thereby the fulfilment of the human and cosmic history. By introducing this new concept of witnessing through the power of the Spirit into the theological language of the early Church, the author of the Acts of the Apostles has linked the historical ministry of Jesus to the continued ministry of the Church through its members, which is moving towards its eschatological realization. The factual witnessing the disciples had experienced in the company of Jesus during his earthly ministry has now to be transformed into a dynamic and personal witnessing, which they should share with others and enrich them. It is not a question of what they can make of others; rather it is about what they can become for others.

Here it is important to examine the inner meaning of witnessing as the new dimension and content of the mission of the disciples. Witnessing to someone in the biblical sense means to represent and reproduce the personality of the one whose witness one claims to be. The disciples of the risen Jesus are asked to represent and reproduce in their life the personal qualities of Jesus, whose historical witnesses they were during his earthly ministry. Hence we see the importance attached to the historical witnessing of the one who had to be elected to the group of the Twelve in the place of Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:21-22). The disciples had to reproduce in their words and deeds the value systems and world vision of Jesus as they have experienced them during his earthly ministry. This exercise had to do with Jesus' attitude towards God, towards the world, towards Judaism, towards the Torah, towards the followers of other religions, towards the poor and the outcast, and towards the sick and the suffering. What Jesus has started as a new movement and as a new way of thinking and living, transcending the conventions and criteria of established religions, the disciples have to continue in their mission of witnessing to the same Jesus Christ. They have to stand firm and struggle towards creating a humanity committed to the values of the kingdom of God, to establish which Jesus had to suffer and die, and then rose again to show that the cause he stood for was that of God.

Church's Mission as Christian Witnessing in Our Times

The concept of witnessing has certain basic and inbuilt nuances, which we have to keep in mind when we try to apply it to our times. In the evolution of this concept in non-biblical Greek we still see the use of this concept as a witness to facts in the legal sphere and also witness to truths. In the LXX *martys* is used in a religious sense when Yahweh arranges before the nations a kind of trial in which Israel is presented as witness (*martys*) to what they have experienced (Is 43:10, 12; 44: 8). We have the same religious sense continued in the New Testament in the sense of witness to facts and witness to truths. The development of the distinctive Christian use of the term is the result of their application to the contents of gospel proclamation and to the circumstances in which this took place. It is Luke's usage, which takes us far beyond its general usage, in such a way that for him also the emphasis is on the facts known to him. But the facts are those related to the history of Jesus, especially in relation to his death and resurrection. Since resurrection is a reality transcending historical verification, witnessing cannot be borne to these facts unless their significance is also known to them. However, the effect of their witnessing is not a mere knowledge of facts and truths by the hearers, but rather their faith. Luke has taken special care to establish the historical foundations and the trustworthiness of those who are witnessing. These witnesses are those who are qualified to be witnesses because they themselves lived through those events. Moreover, since it is a witnessing that is leading to faith, the historical witnessing cannot be entirely the normative factor. Hence Paul is called a witness (Acts 22:15; 26:16); and so also Stephen (Acts 22:20) who are not historical witnesses, but at the same time, authentic witnesses.

A closer study of the New Testament would make it clear that the concept of witnessing is also a dynamic one, and it has two major aspects that need to be emphasized. The most important aspect of witnessing is that in the Acts of the Apostles it is basically a personalized one. The legal as well as the factual aspects are elevated to the personal dimension insofar as the person of Jesus Christ has to thoroughly transform the witnesses in such a manner that they can stand for him and for the cause of the kingdom of God. Since this is a personalized concept, witnessing is much more than a communication of information and arguments; rather it is a sharing at the level of an inner compulsion. This is reflected in the words of Peter when he told the members of the Jewish Council. "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). As a result, the concept of witnessing takes on new meanings and new expressions as the witnessing community moves forward in history, especially in our times. In the changed circumstances of the contemporary society there are two major areas where, the Church has to concentrate on its witnessing ministry, namely, in the socio-economic world and in the growing phenomenon of religious pluralism. On the one hand, the Church must get more and more involved in the holistic liberation of the human society in a globalized world. Equally important is the task of the Church to make concrete efforts for the harmony among religions, after it had played a very negative role in the past through its intolerance and hatred of other religions. The unchecked enthusiasm of the missionary movement in the past, through which other world religions were

presented as the work of the devil, has done more harm to the cause of Church. It is to be emphasized that the present stage of history offers the best chance to create a better image of the Church in the family of religions.

It seems opportune to reflect on what the witnessing theme of Acts of the Apostles can further add to the mission of the Church in our times. First and foremost, the witnessing theme of the Acts of the Apostles stresses the importance of the historical foundations of the Christian movement. For all the major New Testament writers the historical facts of Christian origins are of paramount importance.⁷ Christianity is not a mere ideology; nor is it a mere message. It is a historical fact. The principal events of the public ministry of Jesus were wrought in the presence of his disciples and in the midst of the people. The testimony of the apostles rests upon the great acts of God in Jesus Christ, and the resurrection forms the very core of this message. Has historical scholarship taken this fact with sufficient seriousness? Current preoccupation with historical criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism must not blind our eyes to the New Testament's unmistakable stress on those who were the actual witnesses to the primary events. At a time of widespread scepticism about Christian origins this observation is both timely and significant. The witnesses must be faithful not only to the bare facts of the Christ Event, but also to their meaning. This entails presenting Christ and his message with the significance, which genuinely belongs to them. To cite a clear formulation of this holistic witnessing, "To be faithful witnesses we must ever keep before us and before our hearers, the fully rounded, finely balanced, many-sided yet unitary, significance of Christ".⁸ Witnessing to Christ is the summarizing of the various aspects of the mission manifested in the person of Jesus Christ, his healing ministry, his option for the poor and the marginalized as well as his prophetic and critical attitude towards many religious issues in his parent religion.

Mahatma Gandhi on Christian Witnessing

As we are trying to emphasize the urgency of Christian witnessing as the very essence of the mission of the Church in our times, especially in the Indian situation, it is very relevant to listen to some of the salubrious reflections of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of our nation, about the importance of witnessing, on which he dwelt during his personal contacts with many Christians. In his address to the Christian missionaries in Calcutta, YMCA, Gandhi said: "You, the missionaries, come to India thinking that you come to a land of heathens, of idolaters, of men who do not know God. One of the greatest Christian divines, Bp Heber, wrote two lines which have always left a sting with me, 'Where every prospect pleases and only man is vile'. I wish he had not written them".⁹ In the same address he said that Christian missionaries came to India 'under the protection of a temporal power; and it created an impossible bar. So he told them categorically that their mission was not to convert people; nor to give them something; their task was far superior to that, namely, to meet true men and women as fellow seekers and to learn something from them. Then he added, "I miss receptiveness, humility, willingness on your part to identify yourselves with the masses of India".¹⁰ According to Gandhi, the Indian Christians have done violence to their country and even to their new religion by aping the Europeans.

Gandhi's critical remarks about some of the Christian claims are distant reminders of issues that are being discussed in theological circles today. He considered it absurd and dangerous to speak of superiority in matters of faith. One should leave it to the absoluteness of God, and carry on deepening the bond with one's fellow humans. To claim a monopoly of truth is an arrogant attitude lacking in humility and not recognizing God's absoluteness.¹¹ In *Harijan* he wrote, "Today they (missionaries) tell people that there is no salvation for them except through the Bible and through Christianity. It is customary to decry other religions and to offer their own as the only one that can bring deliverance. This attitude must be radically changed".¹² All the principal religions of the world have produced great saints. One should not turn the holiness of each religion into instruments of division and subjugation. The fact of sainthood in every religion should affirm the fundamental truth in every religion and its validity within itself, and not in comparison with one another. Respect and reverence for other religions and religious founders were in the very nature of Gandhi. He wrote, "All religions are divinely inspired, but they are imperfect because they are products of the human mind and taught by human beings. Hence the necessity of tolerance, which is as far from fanaticism as the North Pole, is from the South. True knowledge of religion breaks down the barriers between faith and life".¹³

New Horizons of Evangelization

Consequently, we are very much in need of a shift of emphasis and a change of perspective in our understanding of the mission of the Church called for not only on account of the changes that have arisen at the social, political, religious and cultural levels throughout the world but also on the basis of an in depth study of the biblical passages themselves that have been used and also abused for the carrying out of mission by the various Churches and their missionaries during the past few centuries. The emphasis on making disciples and giving baptism was motivated not so much from a commitment to Christ, but rather from a commitment to one's own denomination and its competitive growth. This has been a departure from the holistic understanding of mission as we find spread out in the Gospels, especially in the mission of the Twelve and the Seventy, as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. There the focus is on announcing the kingdom of God and bringing peace

and healing to the people. Luke, in particular, has presented the mission of Jesus as one filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, making a solemn announcement about his ministry as preaching good news to the poor which consists in the release of the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed (Lk 4:18-19). With his social concerns and his criticism of the rich, Luke has presented Jesus as one who was committed to the cause of the poor and the oppressed. In fact, Luke was translating the Jewish concept of the kingdom of God into a more intelligible language of the wider Roman Empire. Luke had already referred to John the Baptist as instructing his hearers about the demands of social justice (Lk 3:10-14) and the same concern is now given an official recognition in the proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth. Through this bold presentation of the social dimension of the ministry of Jesus, Luke has given us an insight into the nature of the contextualization of gospel values, and this is very much different from the traditional theology of mission as a programme of saving the souls.

As we look at these facts and face the question about what mission today means, the obvious answer is that we need to recognize a shift of emphasis from our traditional concepts and approaches in order to focus on the centrality of the kingdom of God in mission theology. The bane and burden of mission, as it was practiced during and after the colonial periods, were that it was almost exclusively ecclesiocentric, so much so that the success and fruitfulness of mission were measured from the growth of the church. Thanks to a new thinking about the mission of the Church in a pluralistic world, there is a growing awareness that there is need of a re-conception in our understanding of the concept of mission and its praxis in our contemporary society. We have to allow for some kind of flexibility in our understanding and application of a theology of mission. Bearing witness to Christ, proclaiming the kingdom of God and its values, commitment to justice, peace and freedom, dialogue between peoples of various religious traditions, inculturation, inter-culturation, and caring for the ecological concerns of this planet earth, all seem to belong to the parameters of a holistic mission theology in our times. In all these the Church has to play the role of a servant in the same way as Christ was a servant who came not to be served but to serve and give his life for the salvation of the whole world (Mk. 10: 45). It was this servant role of the Church that was restored in Vatican II, and this became the basis and rationale of the very success of Vatican II. But as the Church is both Divine and Human, there is always the danger of it gradually getting tuned to the human dimension, and it is a danger to which not only the hierarchy but also the rank and file of the Church are always exposed. All are in need of a constant going back to the roots of our *being* even as we are struggling with the process of our *becoming*.

An obvious question is in order: Is the mission of the Church at crossroads? The answer to this question is this: If we understand the mission of the Church as identified with conversion from other religions to Christianity, there is a crisis in mission in our times, especially in multi-religious countries like India. Consequently, mission understood exclusively in terms of proclaiming the gospel, aiming at conversion is not relevant either. But if we understand mission in terms of service to the kingdom of God, in which the evangelizers become true witnesses of Christ in the way we have explained above, there is no danger for mission. Hence, the relevance of mission also cannot be called into question. Some would call it a play of words arguing that it is diluting the contents of the Gospel and a going back on the mission command of the risen Lord. It is precisely here that we have to apply the diachronic and synchronic principles of biblical hermeneutics, namely, the principle of interpretation through which we allow for the *then* and the *now* dimensions of the meaning of a biblical text. The Bible as the Word of God written in human language with its limitations has to be interpreted using the sound principles developed by scholars and approved by the Church. In fact, *Dei Verbum* has clearly articulated this dimension of biblical interpretation when it says that literary, historical, cultural factors are all to be taken into account in the interpretation of the Bible.¹⁴ A blind adherence to the text of the Bible would lead us to biblical fundamentalism, as it happens in many Christian groups and also among some Catholic charismatics. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, a very important document published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission with the approval of Pope John Paul II, has clearly established the need of a scientific and critical study of the Bible and also the need of the actualization as well as the inculturation of the Bible.¹⁵

Parameters of Christian Witnessing in our Times

Explaining the role and function of the people of God in the Church, *Lumen Gentium* refers to their priestly office which is exercised by receiving the sacraments, by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life and by self-denial and active charity (LG 10). Likewise, the prophetic office of the people of God also is explained as consisting of a living witness to Christ, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give honour to his name (LG 12). Based on this instruction, there is a great emphasis being laid on the witnessing role of the Church, of Christian life, in the world of today. The role of the Church, especially in countries characterized by religious pluralism, is understood to be effected more through witnessing than through direct preaching. The religious all over the world are reminded of their responsibilities to live a life of witnessing to Christ (LG 46). As early as 1947 Pius XII had summoned all Christians to their task of bearing witness to Christ in these words, "Today more than ever before, and as in

the first centuries of her existence, the Church chiefly needs witnesses... who by their whole way of life make the true countenance of Christ shine out before a world which has grown pagan".¹⁶

Following the example of early Christians, Christian witnessing today should be based on a profound faith in Christ and a personal experience of the Spirit of Christ. Vatican II has already opened up new vistas concerning this personal dimension of Christian faith and the sharing in the Spirit as the basis and foundation of Christian life. This again is the source and starting-point of Christian witnessing in our times. This witnessing dimension of Christian life invites us to reflect on the theology of presence, especially in a country like India, which is characterized by religious and cultural pluralism. Presence implies self-awareness and at the same time it means relation to others. It means the integration of one's self-awareness to one's relationship with others. Presence means reciprocity and it means an ontological attitude of 'being with others and for others'. The basic meaning of this altruistic presence is derived from the very mystery of God. Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is the most authentic manifestation on earth of the divine mystery of presence. The essential mission of the Church is the mission of this presence, of being there. The disciples of Jesus have to make this presence a dynamic and challenging one through the quality of their life. The most important evangelising work of the Christians in our times is to become evangelised persons radiating the love of Christ.

These reflections may create a certain amount of uneasiness in the minds of many well-meaning Christians. Are theologians somehow gelatinising the Christian message and watering down the meaning of mission? Christianity is becoming more and more a minority community and the present trends seem to show that it is going to be a pattern for the future also. Hence, missiologists and missionaries bemoan the failure of the mission in Asia and try to analyse its cause. But the crucial question is this: By which standard are we to decide 'success' and 'failure'? Is a minority situation an unpleasant predicament? Is it all love for Christ or a succinct play of our own selfishness to have the Church as the point of attention for the whole world? If it were all a question of real love for Christ, we would rather go by the example and more clear teaching of Christ than by certain sayings of Jesus detached from their real context. The praxis of Jesus did not reflect a military strategy of conquest. Jesus' priority was to proclaim the Gospel, to reflect on the love of God for the poor and the marginalized. Jesus was for the God of small persons and small things. He exercised his healing power in favour of the little ones and the outcast of the society. He told his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock" (Lk. 12: 32). The minority situation is not an anomalous one and it is not a problem that is to be remedied as a first priority. In fact, minority situations have a kenotic value. A humble realization of our own limitations and weakness takes us to the power of God and his Spirit. This return to the centre and to the source results in the true mission of the Church. The authenticity and the power of the Christian mission are not to be gauged by numbers but by the transparency to God's kenotic love and fidelity to the eternal symbol of the Cross.

In its Statement on the "The Challenge of Hindutva: An Indian Christian Response" Indian Theological Association has formulated some very important remarks which should serve as a permanent reminder for the Church in India. It states, "The Church is the community of Jesus' disciples who are called together by his word and animated by his Spirit to continue his mission and carry it out in all the nations and among all the peoples of the world. The Church's mission is none other than that of Jesus himself.... The Church will be able to carry out this mission not only by preaching the good news of God's rule but also, and even more effectively, by being an authentic symbol and living witness to it. Any preoccupation on its part with numerical expansion runs counter to its very mission of witnessing to God's rule, which transcends the boundaries of any religion.... The Church should also make all efforts to remove every trace of triumphalism, exclusivism and any attitude of superiority in its teachings, structures, evangelizing activities and the styles of the functioning of its institutions.... It is only when the Church, with all its structures and institutions, ceases to seek power, prestige, wealth and expansion for itself and becomes a servant following the footsteps of Christ, committed to the life and liberation of all peoples of this land, and particularly the last and the least, and to the harmony of all communities based on genuine love and justice that it will truly grow as the Church of Christ".¹⁷

Conclusion

Though we have not seen the historical Jesus with our eyes nor heard him with our ears, and thus cannot be the factual witnesses of Jesus, still we believe in him on the basis of the faith that has been handed on to us from the historical witnesses (Jn 17:20), and we participate in the blessing Christ has pronounced on all who believe in him without seeing him (Jn 20:29). This faith in Christ should grow through a closer understanding of the Gospels and a personal experience of the Spirit. A life that is rooted in faith and experienced in the Spirit naturally expresses itself in words and deeds. If the apostles and the early believers preached the word of God, it is no less the duty of convinced and committed believers in Christ today to proclaim the Good News of salvation to their fellow humans. But direct preaching and all that is involved in it must take into account the religious and cultural context of our contemporary society. It is here that the word of preaching has to take the form of "dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the

values in their society and culture (AG 2). This kind of dialogue and cooperation arising from a spirit of understanding and appreciation can bear fruits only if it is the result of a radical conversion within the Christian believers themselves. This kind of dialogue and cooperation arising from a spirit of understanding and appreciation can bear fruits only if it is the result of a radical conversion within the Christian believers themselves. There is no question of opportunism and diplomacy in it; that would go counter to the very meaning of witnessing. It should come from a deep conviction that God is present and active in all world religions.

Notes

- ¹ J.D.Kingsbury, "The Composition and Christology of Mat. 28: 16-20", *JBL*, 93, 1974, 573-584.
- ² Joseph Pathrapankal, *The Christian Programme*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1999, 71-100.
- ³ Justin, *Apol.* 1, 31, 7; Aristides, *Apol.* 22, 8.
- ⁴ Cfr. Mt. 10: 5-15; Mk. 6: 6b-13; Lk. 9: 16.
- ⁵ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, New York: Doubleday, Vol. I, 1991; Vol.II, 1994. Other similar works are: Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*, London: SCM Press, 1983; and *Jesus the Jew*, London: SCM Press, 1973; James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus' Jewishness*, New York: The Crossword Publishing Company, 1991.
- ⁶ Cfr. Robert P. Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991, 168.
- ⁷ Cfr. A. Barr, "The Factor of Testimony in the Gospels", *Exp T*, 49, 1937-38, 401-408.
- ⁸ N. Alexander, "The United Character of the New Testament Witness of the Christ-Event". H. Anderson and W. Barclay, eds., *The New Testament in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, 1965, 32 ff.
- ⁹ CW XXVII, p. 436; *Young India*, 28, July 1925.
- ¹⁰ CW XXVII, p. 438.
- ¹¹ *Young India*, 8. 11. 1927.
- ¹² CW XXVII, 436; *Young India*, 28, July 1925.
- ¹³ *Young India*, 8.11.1927.
- ¹⁴ DV 12.
- ¹⁵ *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993, 113.
- ¹⁶ AAS, 39, 1947, 312.
- ¹⁷ *ITA Twenty-third Annual Meeting*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, 2000.

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