

# **An Asian reflection on Inauguration Sermon of Pope Benedict XVI**

By Tissa Balasuriya, O.M.I., Sri Lanka

With the death of Pope John Paul II there was much speculation as to who would be his successor and what would be his orientation. With the opening of the conclave it was becoming clear what the issues involved were, especially with the sermon of the then cardinal Ratzinger to the conclave. With the election of cardinal Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI attention has been centered on his personality, thinking and long service in the Curia of the Church and in the field of theology. I reflect here principally on his inauguration sermon on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April.

There has been a presentation and acceptance of the present pope as a person who is simple, humble, intelligent, intellectual and consistent in his theological positions and the ministry in the church. Since the election his public presentation has shown a friendly and open personality, happily surprised to see the church as alive and young. I reflect from an Asian perspective on history on the sermon of inauguration and his message to the Cardinals and media and other religions after the election. In these the Pope himself does not want to give a program of governance or deal with many aspects of theology such as much discussed issues of morality. He speaks rather of the role and service of the pope in the present world by using metaphors and symbols and events from the Gospels and Epistles. I would take up the issues in a rather systematic way, asking what is the worldview, the Anthropology and Christology behind these texts. The theme is principally around the representation of Christ as the way, life, light and joy for humankind.

## **A fallen/lost humanity**

The Pope's understanding of the world would seem to reflect the traditional theology of the fall of humanity into original sin and the need of a redeemer who saves us by his sacrifice as the lamb of God. It is a world view in which

“ the human race -everyone of us- is the lost sheep in the desert which no longer knows the way... The pastor must be inspired by Christ's holy zeal: for him it is not a matter of indifference that so many people are living in the desert and there are so many kinds of desert. There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, desert of abandonment, loneliness of destroyed love. There is the desert of God's darkness, emptiness of souls, no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore the earth treasures no longer serve to fill God's kingdom for all to live in, but have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction. The church as a whole and all her pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One, who gives us life, and life in abundance. The symbol of the lamb also has a deeper meaning. In the Ancient Near East it was customary for kings to style themselves shepherds of their people. This was an image of their power, a cynical image: to them their subjects were like sheep which the shepherd could dispose of as he wished. When the shepherd of all humanity, the living God, himself became a lamb, he stood on the side of the lambs, with those who are down trodden and killed. This is how he reveals himself to be the true shepherd: 'I am the good Shepherd... I lay down my life for my sheep.' Jesus says of himself (John 10, 14f). It is not power, but love that redeems us! This is God's sign: he himself is love. How often we wish that God would make show himself stronger, that he would strike decisively, defeating all evil and creating a better world. All ideologies of power justify themselves in exactly this way, they justify the destruction of whatever would stand in the way of progress and the liberation of humanity...

My dear friends- at this moment I can only say: pray for me that I may learn to love the lord more and more. Pray for me that I may learn to love his flock more and more- in other words, you the holy church, each one of you and all of you together. Pray for me that I may not flee

for fear for the wolves. Let us pray for one another, that the lord will carry us and that we will learn to carry one another.”<sup>1</sup>

From this perspective the mission of the Church was understood as the eternal salvation of souls by baptism and belonging to the Catholic Church, rather than the building of the Kingdom of Justice and Peace on this earth. Eventually in the colonizing period of Christianity mission was de facto related to European expansion.

### **Christ of the colonizers**

Reflecting on these words from an Asian experience one begins to ask how have Christ and the Church been the good shepherd for our peoples during the last 5 centuries. Would it be correct to say that for the Church to draw us out for salvation into the ‘net of the gospel’ there was the doctrine of the whole of humankind being irredeemably in original sin? Is this the primordial desert in which so many people are said to be living.

Reflecting on the life and teaching of Jesus one can have a view of his message and role as one of universal love, and justice and care for all. Was not the first approach of Christians following Jesus one of bearing witness to his love as against the ideology and powers of the dominant rulers and exploiters of the society of the day? Was not the Christian community then rather on the side of the down trodden, the weak, the poor and the hungry?

But this was not the image of Christ that was presented to the Asian peoples, especially by Christian mission in Asia from Europe from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The salvation of humanity was presented as one in which it is only the baptized were “the communion of Saints”. The others were regarded being in error and destined for damnation unless saved by the Church. It was in this context that the dominant Christianity of the day had allied itself with the ruling powers in the world and came to our lands and elsewhere in the world outside of Europe as invaders, conquerors and even exterminators of many peoples and annihilators of several civilizations, cultures and religions, especially in the Americas and Oceania. The peoples of the Asian regions also suffered, their lands being colonized, their cultures downgraded, religions despised, places of worship destroyed and sacred writings burned. Did this not go on till about the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century when the peoples of Asia and Africa asserted their independence. In all this we have to ask what was the image of Christ that inspired the conquering peoples? Did not the leaders of the Church often support and justify such aggression relating it to the so called salvific mission of the Church. Unfortunately in recent times this large chapter of Church history has been forgotten when referring to the role of the Church delving into the “deep sea of history” and when speaking of the desert and the salty waters of death. A question that arises is how did the Church, beginning with the founder Jesus Christ and the apostles like Peter and Paul, come to be one of the main oppressive forces in human history allied to the ideologies of power and from our point of view tried to

“justify the destruction of whatever would stand in the way of progress and the liberation of humanity”.

Reflecting on the role of the church in the present world we can think of two realities: first the closed world system and second an exclusivist theology that claims to possess the absolute truth concerning God, Christ and human salvation.

### **The Closed World System**

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations in italics are from the Popes Inauguration Sermon 24/4/2005

The prevalent world order is a result of the European colonial expansion since 1492 into most of the available spaces of the world. It was built alongside the world's greatest genocide of millions of humanity. Not only does the main structure of the world remain with the Western peoples taking much of the lands as in the Americas and Oceania and benefiting from the continuing effects of colonial expansion, but it is also a closed world system within a so called free enterprise liberal economy. Particularly the peoples of Asia cannot now move to places where they could have more space and resources for a decent livelihood, although millions of Africans and Asians were taken earlier as slaves and/or indentured labor.

Would not the whole world order, born of violence and maintained by force of arms, need to be radically remade so that all may have the chance of living and earning their daily bread. In these circumstances how is it that the teaching of the Church failed to oppose strongly the setting up of this colonial and imperial world order and is not yet reflecting seriously on the required global reforms. Neither has the present Church the strategies for bringing about the situation of the vast majority of the poor peoples being led "out of the desert towards the place of life". Is this because still the Church as a whole, even in its leadership, is de facto implicitly allied with the powers that be in its thinking and in its strategies?

### **An Exclusivist Model of Salvation**

A second reality is that the Church has a theology and practice that claims an exclusive divine revelation with a monopoly of the path to salvation and therefore an exclusion, in different degrees, of other Christians and other religions from knowing or seeing the light in the 'sea of darkness'. The Church claims to possess and exclusively interpret the gospel.

"We are living in alienation in the salt waters of suffering and death; in a sea of darkness without light. The net of the gospel pulls us out of the waters of death and brings us into the splendor of God's light into true life. It is really true: as we follow Christ in this mission to be fishers of men, we must bring men and women out of the sea that is salted with so many forms of alienation and to the land of life, into the light of God. It is really so. The purpose of our lives is to reveal God to men (sic) and only where God is seen does life truly begin. Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is."

Our historical experience in Asia is that the other Asian religions have also called humans to move from darkness to life, from selfishness to sharing and caring for one another and nature. For thousands of years our peoples have been nourished spiritually by these other Asian religions. The Asian cultures and civilizations were based on their good moral teachings. Our peoples appreciate very much Jesus as seen from the gospels and find much inspiration in the original Christianity. Thus Mahatma Gandhi found inspiration for his philosophy and strategies of non violence especially in the Sermon of the Mount. But how is it that in recent centuries the Christ presented to our peoples has been a source of death and destruction in many parts of the world. It has also at least implicitly supported the unjust and closed world system. It has had an interpretation of the path of salvation as exclusively reserved to the gospels as defined in theology since the post Constantinian era.

### **Our dilemma**

We are in a dilemma because while Jesus of the gospels is life giving and enlightening, the Christ of imperial Christianity has been destructive and disrespectful for others. How did the original Jesus Christ become the ally of imperial Christianity? This is an area of search and reform that the present day Christians must inquire into and realize. Unfortunately if we claim the monopoly of absolute truth, the uniqueness of revelation and the validity of centennial tradition even though of a distorted

Christianity, we deprive ourselves of the sources of self critical transformation that are necessary. Has not historical Christianity claimed and exercised a sort of dictatorship of the absolute truth (far worse than any “dictatorship of relativism” of recent times)?

Benedict XVI invites us “not to be afraid”, “to open wide the doors for Christ”, recalling the words of John Paul II in 1978 in his inaugural address. But are the present understanding of the whole of humanity being in the desert of evil and of Christ as the unique son of God and the Church as the only way to Christ and salvation adequate and meaningful for dealing with the problems of the closed world order? Can the exclusivist theology that claims a monopoly of the truth and of the path to Christ and Salvation promote interreligious relationships with due respect for others.

The Pope affirms in a joyful manner:

“The Church is alive, the Church is young. She holds within herself the future of the world and therefore shows each of us the way towards the future.”

This is beautiful but requires clear historical evaluation and strong action for a just and peaceful global transformation. Many may find the discourse of the Pope very meaningful and inspiring. Still others may doubt whether the present Church teachings and practices are responding to the genuine and legitimate human aspirations.

From an Asian point of view it would be necessary to recall the need to rediscover the Jesus of the Gospel who has been long misrepresented in the dominant theology. Therefore we need to work for the radical reform of the world order and a more genuine acceptance of other religions, in working towards human salvation and liberation and thereby undertaking a foundational reform of the Church itself.

### **Challenge of the time**

“My real program of governance is not to do my own will, not to pursue my own ideas, but to listen, with the whole church, to the word and the will of the Lord, to be guided by Him, so that He himself will lead the Church at this hour of our history”.

The Pope invites us to be with him in his lonely summit:

“At this moment, weak servant of God that I am, I must assume this enormous task, which exceeds all human capacity. How can I do this? How will I be able to do it?... I am not alone, I do not have to carry alone what in truth I could never carry alone. All the saints of God are there to protect me to sustain me and carry me. And your prayers, my dear friends, your indulgence, your love, your faith and your hope accompany me”.

We can respond to the Pope’s request

“Pray for me that I may not flee for fear of the wolves. Let us pray for one another, that the Lord will carry us and that we will learn to carry one another.”

Such prayer needs a critical awareness of the “ideologies of power” that dominate the present world and an active presence and participation in the difficult and risky endeavor of counteracting the exploitation of the many by a powerful few. This requires also a deep purification of our memory as well as of our current thinking on other religions and of the women and men of the world in their quest for fullness of life according to their lights.

“God’s will does not alienate us, it purifies us, even if this may be painful – and so it leads to ourselves. In this way, we serve not only Him, but the salvation of the whole world, of all history.”

May the eventual program of governance of Benedict XVI help bring about this reign of righteousness in the world and within and through the Church. In that commitment we may also say

“The Church holds within herself the future of the world, therefore shows each of us the way towards the future” –

whatever, whoever be the wolves threatening the weak and the poor who are the lost sheep of the world.

May this reflection help us rethink our faith and social options and interhuman relationships and give us also the light to foster a radical reform of the Church under the leadership of Benedict XVI that the whole of humanity may move forward out of the salt waters of suffering and death to the fullness of life? We can all help the Pope in this by loyally contributing our reflective judgment to the formation of his program of governance and the fostering of a more truly Christlike Christianity.