

God Calls Everyone to Repentance

Dearly Beloved in the Lord,

Lenten season begins on Ash Wednesday, (the 25th February this year) and reaches its fulfilment on Easter day. Lent is a season of repentance and spiritual rejuvenation, which is urgently required of us because we have a short life span on earth to be of some use to the Lord.

The word 'repent' is described by Oxford Dictionary as 'feeling of regret or remorse'. We can have feeling of regret or remorse only when we are sure that we have committed a mistake or a number of mistakes/wrong doings. It is a feeling of guilt and an urgent need of forgiveness and restoration. Many people do not consider themselves sinners/wrong doers. They blame human nature or their circumstances for any wrong doing in their life. But God our Creator & Master declares, "Everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence". (Romans 3:23)

"When the Lord saw how wicked everyone on earth was & how evil their thoughts were all the time, he was sorry that he had made them and put them on the earth." (Gen. 6:5-6)

"God's anger is revealed from heaven against all the sin and evil of the people whose evil ways prevent the truth from being known." (Romans 1:18)

God desires that we should accept our sinfulness and turn to him with a sense of urgency and sincerity. See II Chronicles 7:14 –

"If they pray to me and repent and turn away from the evil they have been doing, then I will hear them in heaven, forgive their sins, & make their land prosperous again." Also see Jonah 3:5-10, Micah 7:18-20, Zephaniah 2:1-3, Zechariah 1:2-6, Hosea 10:12 and Joel 2:12-13. Above all, listen to Jesus, the Christ who started his ministry on earth with a call to repentance –

"———— Turn away from your sins, because the kingdom of heaven is near." (Mathew 4:17, also Mk. 1:15).

HOW CAN WE IDENTIFY SIN AND WHAT SHOULD WE REPENT FROM

There is confusion about identifying and defining sin. There are several groups of people who refuse to believe in God's definitions of sin. There are people who believe in and propagate homosexuality as normal behaviour, and those who believe in promiscuous behaviour as normal & natural. There are those who believe that self-confidence, selfishness and pride are necessary for success and not dependence on God, humility and self-sacrificing nature. Some believe that a combination of cloning of humans & research on embryonic stem cells will ensure eternal human beings on earth in due course of time, with no need for forgiveness of sins to overcome death & alienation.

On the other hand, there are people who believe that once you are baptised in Christ your sins are forgiven and washed away. You become a new creation and you can not sin anymore,



therefore there is no reason or cause for repentance. Beware such arguments are unbiblical and devilish. They deny God's urgent Call to repentance for even the people of new covenant.

God, in His grace, has provided many definitions and descriptions of sin. In Hebrew and Greek languages many words have been used in the Bible to describe sin because it manifests itself in many & diverse forms. Essentially, sin is opposing God as His enemy/adversary – see Ps.51:3-4-

“ ——— I am always conscious of my sin. I have sinned against you – only against you and have done what you consider evil.” Also see Romans 8: 7-8- (Good News Version)

“So a person becomes an enemy of God when he is controlled by his human nature; for he does not obey God's law, and in fact he cannot obey it. Those who obey their human nature can not please God.”
(Good News Version)

BIBLICAL CONCEPTS OF SIN

In the Bible, the concept of sin is mainly described as 'missing the mark of God's perfect standard'. Just like an archer who does not always hit the bull's eye of his target, sin is falling short of God's holy standard whether it is intentional or unintentional. In Hebrew – 'Hata' and in Greek 'Hamartia' are the general words to describe this concept. Many different kinds of sin come under this umbrella of Hata/hamartia. Some sins are committed out of lack of knowledge, others are an obvious attempt to disobey God, like Adam & Eve and countless other human beings. The following words are the major words used for sin in the Bible. It would be helpful to read them carefully and identify their presence in our life –

1. HAMARTIA: “Originally meant to miss the mark, lose, not share in something, be mistaken”. It's meaning takes in offences against morals, laws, men or gods. It is a collective term. It can mean anything from stupidity to law breaking. Greek word 'Hamartia' is represented in Hebrew by –
HATT'AT – Meaning lapse, sin.
AWON – Guilt, sin as a conscious deviation from the right way.
PESA - Rebellion, an unjust act committed against the law.
2. ADIKIA - (Comes from legal terms) unrighteousness, injustice and unjust deeds. This Greek word is represented in Hebrew as –
SEQER – deceit, fraud or lie.
AWON – As described above.
PESA – As described above.
ASAQ – Act unjustly, oppress, extort.
AWLAH – Perversity, wickedness.
HAMAS – Violent act, injustice.
3. PARABASIS (Greek) – Transgression of the law.
PARAPTOMA (Greek) – Fall down beside, lose one's way, generally a moral lapse. There are only isolated instances of its meaning unintentional sins committed in weakness(errors) Ps. 19:12.

This Greek word is represented in Hebrew as –
MA'AL – (Deliberately) commit acts of unfaithfulness.
PESA – Described earlier.
AWEL – Injustice (Ezekiel 3: 20; 18: 24)



DANIEL'S PRAYER OF REPENTANCE FOR HIS PEOPLE

Daniel Chapter 9 records how he prayed to God and confessed his own sins & the sins of his people. His prayer is important

because it shows us the depth and variety of our sin that we many times tend to ignore –

“Then I turned to the Lord God to seek an answer by prayer & supplication with fasting and sack cloth & ashes _____ we have sinned (Hata) and done wrong acted wickedly (Rasham) and rebelled (Marad), turning aside (Sur) from your commandments and ordinances. We have not listened to your servants, the prophets (Sur) _____ All Israel has transgressed (Abar) your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice.” (Daniel 9:3-11)

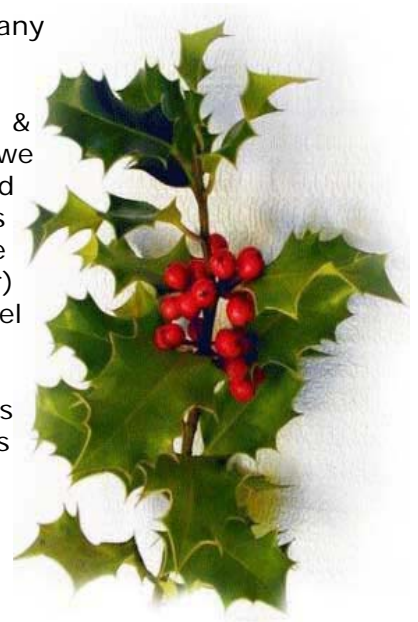
The following phrases from Daniel 9 refer to the coming of Jesus Christ. It is interesting to note the purpose of the coming of Jesus Christ which will be completed after his second coming – 9:24 –

To make reconciliation for iniquity (Awon) infraction, crooked behaviour, perversion & guilt.

To bring in everlasting righteousness.

To seal up vision & prophecy.

To anoint the most Holy Place.



Thus we see that the main concept of sin in the Old Testament and the New Testament is the same. It is falling short of God's holy standards, whether it be intentional or unintentional. The call to repentance for restoration is most surely for each & everyone.

LENT IS A TIME FOR CHANGE

During lent, we repent and turn to God with prayer & fasting. In the words of prophet Joel 2:12-13 we turn to God with open, torn hearts and not torn garments. Our fasting & prayers will be as directed by Isaiah in chapter 58:6-11 –

“_____ to loose the bonds of injustice to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free _____ is it not to share your bread with the hungry _____ you shall be like a spring of water whose waters never fail.”

On March 4th, 2009 The Indian Express published a report with a title – “Eliminate Poverty Don't Hide Beggars.” It said, “the Delhi High Court is hardly gung – ho about ‘Jai Ho.’ The judges see the Oscar winning film's storyline as, at best, common place. Slumdog Millionaire may be important for people abroad but not for us, for whom poverty is sadly an everyday sight. A division bench said on Monday in reply to a lawyer's graphic accounts of how the film contained true to life scenes about children pushed into begging _____ the bench said the right formula would be to “eliminate poverty” from the streets, and not ‘hide’ them in a city busy “dressing up” to host common-wealth games next year.”

Our Central Government is being challenged by Delhi High Court to seriously persue poverty elimination programmes. Church is challenged to participate in such poverty elimination programmes, especially during Lent through our Fasting and prayers. Unless we feel the pain and deprivation of hunger & want we will never share our bread with the poor. Unless we share the suffering & shame of the Dalits, the exploited & deprived people, we will never work to break the bonds of injustice and to undo the thongs of yoke of modern slaveries.

Bishop Dr. Geevarghese Mor Coorilos writes in his article ‘significance of Lent Today’, in a booklet called ‘Lenten Lantern’ – “Fasting is an occasion for us to live through the pain of poverty & starvation. _____ As our spiritual Guru, the late lamented Yakoob Mor Themotheose taught me, fasting should enable us to feel the pain of hunger, which will, in turn, make us compassionate to the poor & the needy. Sadly we have lost this social dimension of fasting.”

So, Lent is a time of change that God brings in our life as we turn to the power of God with genuine repentance and trusting faith that accepts forgiveness from gracious God.

LENT IS FOR GIVING UP

Self-denial as many people understand it – giving up something such as a habit or a pleasure has become a common exercise in the world where good health & good looks are at a premium. During Lent people connect this kind of self – denial with religion & spirituality. In fact, lent is not about denying yourself something or some pleasurable habit, it is about denying your very self. Jesus' love motivated Him to give up the privilege of His divine glory and also His human life on the Cross – see Phillipians 2:6-8. A Christian gives himself up to Christ, abandoning everything evil, impure & unworthy of a child of God. Actually, Christ calls upon people to give themselves up for Him – to give up whatever keeps driving them towards death & self – destruction. He calls us to fully give in to Him and get up & go for Him, not going back once Lent is over but going forward. Please read Mathew 16:24-26. St. Paul explains the concept of offering your self to the Lord in Romans 12: 1-2 –

“———— Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be Conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good & acceptable & perfect.”

LENT IS FOR SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

In order to make our bodies more effective and useful for the works of our Lord on this earth, we need spiritual excercises as well as physical excercises. Our physical fitness is ensured by physical excercises. But a body that is physically fit and spiritually feeble is not of any use to the Lord.

Such an offering to the Lord will become useful only if it is a living sacrifice continuously holy and acceptable to God. (Romans 12:1 as mentioned above). Therefore, our spiritual fitness is of utmost importance for which we need regular spiritual excercises. Lent is a special time for such spiritual excercises. See I Timothy 4:7-8 –

“———— Train yourself in Godliness, for while physical training is of some value, Godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”

Also see Titus 2:11-14 –

“For grace of God has appeared — training us to renounce impiety & worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and Godly — a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.”

Our spiritual exercises include –

Regular Bible Study: -Scripture is useful for training in righteousness. A systematic study of scripture, rightly dividing the word of God is necessary. See II Timothy 3:16-17 –

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof — training in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Prayerful Life: - Prayerful life and prayerful attitude is necessary both at personal level and also at community level A distinguishing feature of Christians has been their community prayers right from the very beginning– see Acts 1:14, 23-26, Also Acts 2:42 –

“They devoted themselves to Apostles' teachings & fellowship, to the breaking of bread & the prayers.” Also consider Jesus' teachings about prayer Mtt. 6:5-14.

Fasting & Almsgiving: - As mentioned earlier, our fasting is to be understood and practised as directed by Isaiah 58:6-11 and Jesus' teachings about fasting in Mtt. 6:16-21. Almsgiving must be done as per Jesus' directives in Mtt:6:1-4 and Isaiah 58:7-11.

FELLOWSHIP AND BREAKING OF BREAD

Worshipping in fellowship and breaking the bread in fellowship (Lord's Supper) and witnessing and serving in fellowship has been & continues to be a distinguishing feature of Christians. See Acts4:24-35.

"When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord ——— look at their threats— no one claimed private ownership of any possessions ——— there was not a needy person among them ————."

This is 'Koinonia' (Fellowship) oneness in a common inheritance, oneness in joy & celebration as well as in pain, suffering and persecution). How are we responding to the pain, suffering and deprivations of persecuted Christians in Orissa, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh & Rajasthan?

God is not pleased when we stand idle while others are being treated unjustly. He wants His people to be strong enough to courageously rebuke those who do wrong and generously forgive the same when they repent of wrongdoing. He wants His people to become good Samaritans for those who are persecuted.

EASTER EXPERIENCE

Since all human beings suffer from "Hamartia"-(Miss the mark of God's perfect standard), God made Jesus Christ bear all the sin of all generations of humankind. He was the only perfect human that ever lived on this planet. He measured up to God's perfect standards, therefore he alone could bear the burden of sins of all human race. By paying a very heavy price on the cross for redemption of all those who would believe in him, he set all believers free from slavery of sin and the consequences of sin – eternal death.

In the sacrificial death of Christ as the consequence and wages of sin, substituting us on the cross, he offers us not only freedom from sin but also a life victorious over death, sin and satan. When Christ proved & demonstrated that such a victorious, eternal life would be possible in a transformed material body, that day is called Easter day. Easter is the beginning of eternal human life on earth by conversion of mortal human body into immortal human body. See Romans 8:11.

"If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to you mortal bodies also through his spirit that dwells in you." Also see I Corinthians 15:20-23.

When through faith and baptism, we are engrafted in the resurrected, victorious body of Christ, we come to share the experience of victory over sin & death. We taste a state of sinlessness & guiltlessness, a state of victory over the power of Satan & deathlessness. This is Easter experience & we are filled with joy & gratitude to God. Since He died and rose again, all is changed. Death is not what it was. Suffering is not what it was. In Christ, God forgives and takes care of the forgiven sinner and His forgiveness continues to be given again & again, if we turn to Him with genuine repentance. Thus our growth towards perfection of Christ continues, till we reach the full stature of our Lord.

May you all have a very rejuvenating & renewing Lent and very joyous & blessed Easter.

Yours affectionately,

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