



ASIA MISSION CONFERENCE



Bible Studies

*Journeying Together:
Prophetic Witness to the
Truth and Light in Asia*



Christian Conference of Asia

BIBLE STUDIES

**Journeying Together:
Prophetic Witness to the Truth
and Light, in Asia**



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Preface

Spending time in community or group with fellow believers for Biblical and theological reflections is important for our spiritual journey during any ecumenical event. Bible studies are designed to reflect more deeply on respective themes of ecumenical conferences and contemporary realities, and to help connect the issues and themes to God's Word.

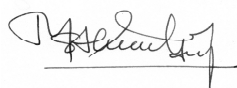
The theme of the Asia Mission Conference 2017, 'Journeying Together: Prophetic Witness to the Truth and Light in Asia' is developed on the bases of two Biblical verses: John 18:37 and John 8:12. The planning group of the (AMC) selected relevant Biblical portions related to the theme for three Bible study sessions:

- Bible Study I: John 8: 12-20
- Bible Study II: John 14: 1-14
- Bible Study III: John 18: 28-38; 20: 21-22

Based on these Biblical verses, eight Bible study resources have been prepared with the help of eight Asian Biblical scholars from different churches. It is our prayer and hope that the Bible study outlines included in this booklet will help participants to stimulate their thoughts and reflections, and to engage meaningfully in creative and interactive discussions.

About 600 participants of the Asia Mission Conference-2017 will be divided into 20 small groups, and they will be engaged in serious discussions and reflections during the Bible study sessions scheduled to take place immediately after the morning worship on three days.

We sincerely hope that these eight Bible study resources will be used not only during the AMC, but that churches and ecumenical groups will continue to use these resources in the post AMC period for their Biblical and theological reflection and study on the theme, 'Journeying Together: Prophetic Witness to the Truth and Light, in Asia'.



Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA

Bible Studies on Asia Mission Conference theme: an Overview

Churches in Asia could consider finding new approaches to their mission and call to witness. They need to start afresh. They need to plan and do this effectively in an ecumenical way. The Asia Mission Conference 2017 (AMC) gives them this opportunity. It will help add new momentum to the ecumenical growth in Asia.

The conference has wide scope with participants from different walks of life and from many parts of the world. This Bible study resources included in this booklet aim to help participants and member churches of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) to ponder over the realities of the world through the Word.

At every historic event, Biblical texts invite us to engage in God's mission with renewed vigour, new vision, and commitment. Asian theologians, from different ecclesial traditions, contributed their Biblical hermeneutics in eight Bible studies included in this booklet. They focus on the theme of the Asia Mission Conference - 'Journeying Together: Prophetic Witness to the Truth and Light, in Asia'.

The first Bible study by Dr. Yim Tesu, from South Korea, helps us to reflect on John 8: 12-20. He interprets the passage by prophetic criticism on the moral decay in witnessing to the truth and light especially in the Korean context.

The second Bible study by Dr. Farhana A. Nazir, from Pakistan, based on the same verses mentioned above, highlights the concept of 'light in the context of Jesus' quote, "I am the light". The study brings a contextual hermeneutics in the backdrop of State-promoted oppression against the vulnerable minority communities in Pakistan.

Asian context again comes to the hermeneutical focus in the third Bible study by Dr. Ngur Liana. Using prophetic interpretations of 'Shekhinah', the author invites readers to study the text in the backdrop of religious, social and economic issues of Asia in general, and Myanmar in particular, about the mission and witness in Asia.

The fourth study, by Rev. Sam Koshy Thalathayil, from India, articulates the significance of dialogue of linguistic and contextual exposition of 'the way, the truth, and the life.' It emphasises the need to go beyond liberal hedonism of the market and populism of fundamentalism. It considers the prophetic dimension of mission while responding to Asia's multi-religious context.

The fifth study, by Dr. Naw Eh Tar Gay, provides a special reading of John 14:1-14 through the post-colonial method. This study's special contribution brings in focus the issue of the internally displaced people in Asia into the search of the prophetic witness in Asia.

Dr Eh Tar Gay makes critical analyses of the traits of deception, selfishness of rulers, and the systematic silencing of the justice and brutalising innocent people, and she interprets this passage from the perspective of Jesus Christ's trial.

In the sixth study, Bishop Dr. Daniel S. Thiagarajah reflects on the subjective story with the prophetic encounter in the journey of justice. It is an example of personal struggle for justice, which turns out as a hermeneutic key to read the trial, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This study brings forth a real engagement of the Word in the prophetic transformation of the self, church and the world.

The question of deception, the selfishness of the rulers and the systemic silencing of the justice have been analyzed in the context of the trial of Jesus in the sixth Bible study based on John 18:28-38 & 20:21-22 by Prof. Dr. Victor Aguilan.

The eighth study by Dr. Joyce J. Abugan explains meditative questions of hindrances in the prophetic witnessing. The author focuses on religious hypocrisy and personal interest as hindrances to the values of the gospel. This study brings Asia in context about focused engagement with the Bible. It is an Asian ecumenical hermeneutical take on in interpreting mission in a prophetic paradigm.

These Bible studies may help participants search a new model for ecumenical journey of faith and people of goodwill in Asia.

John 8:12 - 20

12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." 13 The Pharisees then said to him, "You are bearing witness to yourself; your testimony is not true." 14 Jesus answered, "Even if I do bear witness to myself, my testimony is true, for I know whence I have come and whither I am going, but you do not know whence I come or whither I am going. 15 You judge according to the flesh, I judge no one. 16 Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone that judge, but I and he[a] who sent me. 17 In your law it is written that the testimony of two men is true; 18 I bear witness to myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness to me." 19 They said to him therefore, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father also." 20 These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

1

A Way To Be a Powerful Witness of Christ

John 8:12-20

*- Prof. Dr. Yim Tesu**

1. Introduction

In order to be the witnesses of Christ, the Truth and the Light, Christians themselves must be the people of truth and light, first. The purpose of this Bible study is to look for the causes of powerless witness and to suggest the way of powerful witness in Asia.¹ I will divide John 8:12-20 into verse 12 and verses 13-20 for convenience.

2. John 8:12: The Way of Disciples by following Christ

Verse 12 says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Verse 12 can be divided into four parts:

8:12a: Christ is the light of the world

8:12b: A follower of Christ

8:12c: A follower of Christ will never walk in darkness

8:12d: A follower of Christ will have the light of life.

**Prof. Dr. Yim Tesu is a Professor Emeritus of Hoseo University, Director of Institute of Second Reformation, South Korea*

¹ . It is a real challenge for the Asian Christians.

2. 1 John 8:12a: Christ is the Light of the World

In v.12a Jesus says that “I am the light of the world.” The representative scripture that says “Jesus is the light of the world” is John 1:4. “In him was life, and that life was ‘the light of all people’.” In addition, the verses that say “Jesus Christ is the light” are Matt. 4:16; Luke 2:32; John 3:19; 9: 5; 12:36, 46; Acts 10:30. Jesus is the light of the world. Therefore, we also have to be the light of the world.

2. 2 John 8:12b: A follower of Christ

2.2.1 A Follower of Christ = A Disciple of Christ

“Whoever follows me”² in V. 12b i.e. “A follower of Jesus Christ” (*ho akolouthôn*) is a disciple of Jesus Christ. Easy English version translated “He/she who follows me” to “Anyone who becomes my disciple.” Matt. 16:24 says, “Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Here we can find that “a disciple” is “a follower” of Jesus (also John 21:19, 22).

2.2.2 A Follower of Christ = A Believer in Christ

“He/she who follows me (Jesus)” in v. 12b means “He/she who believes in me (Jesus).” Most of the words meaning ‘to follow Jesus,’ in John’s Gospel, also mean ‘to believe in Jesus’ (John 1:40, 43; 10:27; 12:26; 13:36; 21:19).

“Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he/she said to him, ‘Follow me!’”(John 21:19). Peter was a follower of Jesus, a man who confessed and believed that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matt. 16:16).

2.2.3 A Follower of Christ = An Abider in the Word of Christ

A follower of Christ is one who abides in the words of Christ and keeps the words of Christ (John 15:7; Col. 3:16; 1John 2:14). “If you

² .NRSV

remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” (John 15:7).

2.2.4 A Follower of Christ = A Keeper of the Words of Christ

A follower of Christ is a keeper of the words of Christ (Luke 8:15; John 14:23; 17:6; 1Cor. 15:2; 1John 2:5; 3:24; Rev. 3:10; 22:7). Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” (John 14:23).

2.3. John 8:12c: A Follower of Christ will never walk in Darkness

John 8:12c says, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness.” “Darkness” means “distress, anguish, trouble, ruin, and death.” (Zeph. 1:15; 2 Peter 2:16-17; 1 John 2:11).

“That day will be a day of wrath - a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness.” (Zeph. 1:15).

John 8:12c, “He/she who follows me shall not walk in darkness” means that His follower does not live in trouble, he/she does not fall into the dangers and pitfalls of the world, he/she does not go to hell, he/she gets the light of life and will have eternal life. On the contrary, he/she who does not follow Christ, who believes in Him but does not keep His commandments, will fall into the dangers and pitfalls of the world, and will be unable to have the eternal life.

2.4. John 8:12d: A Follower of Christ will have the Light of Life

2.4.1 A Follower of Christ will have the Light of Life.

John 8:12d says, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” To have the light of life implies to have eternal life and thereby salvation.

2.4.2 “A Follower of Christ” must be “the Light of the World”

A disciple, the one who follows Christ and “has the light of life”, must be “the light of the world.” John 12:36a says well about this. “Believe

in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.”

John 12:36a says that Christ’s disciples also must be “the light of the world.” If we have the light of life, we can be saved, become children of light, become disciples of light. After Christ’s disciples have gained the light of life, they must become “the light of the world” like Christ (Matt. 5:14). The Disciples of Christ should glorify God (Matt. 5:16), become witnesses of the truth (John 18:37), and become witnesses of Christ (Acts 1:8). To be the light of the world, we must be the disciples who keep Christ’s commandments and do good work (Matt. 5:16). Only those who follow Christ rightly will be freed from darkness, will not walk in darkness, and gain the light of life.

If we believe in Christ and follow Him, the light of the world, we are free from darkness, and will have the light of life, the eternal life. (John 3:16; 11: 25-26). He/she who follows Christ, the light of the world, must be the light of the world (1 John 1:7). So that he/she will not go into darkness, and can have the light of life.

Matt. 5:14 says, “You are the light of the world.” In Matt. 5:16, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Cf. Luke 8:16; 11:33; Eph. 5:8). A follower of Christ must be the light of the world.

3. John 8:13-20: Witness of Christ

The verses John 8:13-20 speak of the witnesses of Christ. Those who follow Christ and believe in Him and have the light of life, have a duty to bear witness to Christ (John 18:37; Acts 1:8). Christians of “faith without work” cannot be effective and powerful witnesses of Christ.

3.1 Be witness of Christ (John 8:13-20)

In order to make us witnesses of Christ, Jesus freed us from darkness and gave us the light of life (John 8: 13-20). The verses John 8:13-20 say:

- 1) The Father bears witness to Christ (vv. 14, 18),
- 2) Jesus bears witness of himself (vv. 14, 18), and

- 3) The followers of Christ must also be witnesses of Christ (Acts 1:8).

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

3.2 Causes of powerless witness and suggestions for a way of powerful witness

3.2.1 Causes of Powerless Witness: “Faith Alone” (sola fide)

Disciples who follow Christ have a duty to bear witness to Christ (Acts 1:8). Christ’s disciples also must be witnesses of Christ and of the Truth, as Christ is a witness of the truth (John 18:37). However, witnesses of Christians have faced difficulties and powerlessness in Korea and in Asia. What are the causes? There are many causes for them such as mammonism, secularism, materialism, individualism, egoism, Epicureanism, sexual hedonism etc. Among many causes, the most significant cause of powerless witness is the faith without work.

The theology of “faith alone” has weakened and diminished the work, morals and ethics of Korean Christians. The theology of faith alone is the root of all other causes of the crisis of churches in Korea and in Asia, I believe. Martin Luther wanted a well-balanced Christian life of “faith with work.” But he could not help stressing faith because of the situation of 16th century. He stressed work (On Good Work), too. But for him, work is not a condition for salvation. As a result of this, work has been neglected gradually and “faith without work” has become the mainstream in the Christian life in Korea, in Asia, and in the world. Consequently, as the saying of James, “Faith without work is dead”, “Christians without work” have become dead spiritually, and “churches without work” have become empty and dying in Korea, in Europe, and in the world. How about the church in your country? In this situation, we urgently need a new doctrine of salvation to revive churches in Korea, in Asia, and in the world again. We need to renew the vision of reformation and complement the spirit of it with the “Faith with Work”

3.2.2 A Way of Powerful Witness: “Faith with Work” (fide cum opere)

In Matt. 7:21 Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” In this saying, we can find two conditions for entering the kingdom of heaven, “Faith” and “Work.” The one who has “faith with work” can enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who has “faith without work” cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

In Matt. 25:31-46 we can find also two conditions for entering the kingdom of God, “Faith” and “Work.” People like the sheep and people like the goats have faith in the Son of Man. Both of them call the King, Christ “Lord” (vv. 37, 44). People who have “faith with work” did good pieces of work for the suffering neighbors (vv.34-40) can inherit the kingdom of God, but people who have “faith without work”, who did no good work for the suffering neighbors (vv.41-46) cannot enter the kingdom of God.

4. Conclusion

Let me conclude this study about certain experiences in the Korean context. According to a survey by the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea in 2017, only 20.2% of the respondents believe that they place trust in the Protestant church of Korea: 51.25% of the respondents believe that they distrust the Protestant church of Korea. This means that the credibility of the Protestant churches in Korea is very low. It is shocking for Korean Christians that the credibility of Korean Protestant pastors is the lowest among the clergymen of Korean religions, Protestant church, Catholic Church and Buddhism. The credibility of Korean Protestant pastors ranks 25th out of 33 occupations in Korea, much lower than that of the Catholic priests [11th] and Buddhist monks [18th].

The main cause for this is that Korean Protestant pastors believe in Christ, but their moral consciousness is low and is corrupt. Therefore, the witnesses of Christ by Korean Protestant pastors are ineffective and powerless. 500 years ago Luther introduced the doctrine of salvation by “faith alone” (sola fide). In the name of the doctrine of salvation by

“faith alone”, the Korean Protestant pastors became “pastors without work” i.e. “pastors of dead faith” in large quantities, I believe. As Martin Luther says, in “The Freedom of a Christian,” “Faith alone, without work, justifies, makes free and saves.” They exclude “work” from their daily Christian life. There must be a way to be effective and powerful witnesses of Christ. In this Bible study, I tried to show the way for effective and powerful witness

In order to journey together in the prophetic witnesses of Christ and to revive churches in Korea and in Asia and in the world, and to supplement and complete the 1st Reformation of Martin Luther, we urgently need “Faith with Work.” For becoming powerful witness of Christ and for salvation we need “faith with work” (*fide cum opere*), too. Powerful witnesses of Christ and of the truth such as Noah, Abraham, Daniel, Peter, and Paul are all people of “Faith with Work.” In ‘On Faith and Work,’ St. Augustine asserts that we are saved by “faith with work”, too:

“They would endanger the salvation of their souls if they acted on the false assurance that faith alone is sufficient for salvation or that they need not perform good work in order to be saved.”

“Eternal life should not be promised to anyone who is either not baptized or not leading a good life.” “But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.” (Luke 5:37-38).

Questions

1. Are we saved by “faith alone” (*sola fide*) or by “faith with work” (*fide cum opere*)?
2. What is the way to be a powerful witness of Christ?
3. Can ‘justification by faith and work’ be helpful theological reason for prophetic witness to the Truth and Light in Asia?

John 8:12 - 20

12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." 13 The Pharisees then said to him, "You are bearing witness to yourself; your testimony is not true." 14 Jesus answered, "Even if I do bear witness to myself, my testimony is true, for I know whence I have come and whither I am going, but you do not know whence I come or whither I am going. 15 You judge according to the flesh, I judge no one. 16 Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone that judge, but I and he[a] who sent me. 17 In your law it is written that the testimony of two men is true; 18 I bear witness to myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness to me." 19 They said to him therefore, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father also." 20 These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

Passing the Torch to Others: Prophetic Witness to The Truth and Light, in Asia

John 8:12-20

*- Dr. Farhana A. Nazir **

Introduction

The mission of enlightening the world with Gospel has existed throughout the history of the world though its understanding has varied considerably during different periods and cultures. Encounters with non-Christian individuals were the starting point for the Christian movement called mission. The Christian mission has been widely identified as the sending of individuals into the world for ‘God has sent the church into the world’¹ which later became like “Journeying Together to Witness to the Truth and Light.” Fulfilling the command Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” (John 8:12) It is the main focus of this Bible Study.

Taking ‘the light’ to the Asian context, Pakistan’s experience has been always challenging. In 1857, Thomas Hunter, the first Scottish Missionary came to Pakistan with the aim to share the Light of Christ.²

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¹ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1975), 30.

Hunter was keenly aware of the inherent difficulties concerning mission activity stating, ‘our way seems to be hedged up with thorns...’ Though the Scottish mission was started enthusiastically, it was quickly recognized that missionary issues and concerns would be both challenging and demanding. Unfortunately, on 9 July 1857, Hunter, his wife and their little child were murdered during the mutiny by an escaping prisoner from the local jail.³ Hunter prophetically wrote in his first letter to the Church of Scotland, ‘We go forth in sorrow, bearing with us the precious seeds...our reaping time in this world may already be over.’ After a fearful pause, the Church of Scotland appealed to many others ‘To lift up and carry on the torch which had fallen from the hands of the Pioneer Rev. Thomas Hunter.’⁴ The “Torch” was passed on to John Taylor and Robert Paterson and later to many indigenous Pakistani people but remain challenging. The study of John 8:12-20 and its application bring new encouragement to such contexts that still need to be lighted especially where there is darkness of ignorance, and also where less or no true witness is still in practice. The first question arises is what the light is and where did the idea come from?

1. Jesus: The Light of the World

In John 8:12 Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Jesus intentionally said that He is the “Light of the World” when He was speaking at the Temple on the Feast of Tabernacles which was observed as a festival of lights. Traditionally, numerous lamps were lit in the Temple and there were processions with torches held high to remember the day of God’s providence for the Israelites when they were on the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land (Ex. 3:14; 13:21). Jesus took this opportunity and said that He is the “True Light of the World”. Traditionally, the Light was, also, one of the names of the Messiah

² Hunter took charge of the General Assembly’s institution in Bombay until the middle of October 1856, later moving to Sialkot, now in Pakistan. Youngson, *Forty Years of the Punjab Mission of the Church of Scotland*, 77-79.

³ Elizabeth G. K. Hewat, *Vision and Achievement 1796-1956, A History of the Foreign Mission of the Churches United in the Church of Scotland* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1960), 115.

⁴ Taylor, *In the Land of the Five Rivers*, 12-15,17.

(Isaiah 9:1; 42:6, 9). John proclaimed that Jesus comes from God, who is the light for all humanity (1 John 1:5). It was the light before the incarnation of Jesus (John 1:9; 9:5) that is *now* present in the world.

The major purpose of the light was that a follower “will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Generally, ‘darkness’ denotes ignorance, unbelief and infidelity, especially the darkness of eyes that cannot discern the just or the unjust. Jesus does not focus on fulfilling the desires of the human flesh and of the sight. He is inviting all of us to have inner holiness, grace, and God’s love to lighten the darkness. Such a thought will be helpful to understand how Church mission brought light to the darkness in Asia. Historically, in Asia it was difficult to bring the powerful gospel to the oppressed and the depressed classes. It was so impressive when the Gospel was sent to the difficult place of women and children. In Pakistan between 1885 and 1910, there was the expansion of the *Zanana* Mission (*zan*, woman and *anna* room) which worked within the cultural system allowing women to provide, the light in the darkness, gospel to the oppressed, home education and medicine in their weak health conditions. What women have done in history was just like following Jesus saying that the Spirit has anointed me to proclaim and bring good news, freedom and light to the poor and the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). Such a light has brought awareness and spiritual sight to many dark areas of human life. The most important work of the light was to bring an appealing and true witness as well as judgement that is wonderfully described in John 8:12-20.

2. Jesus as a Witness and Judge to Bring Light

Significantly, the study of John 8: 12-20 makes it clear that Jesus himself witnesses to his Divinity that reveals himself as ‘the ever present light’ for the whole world (Jews and Gentiles). Such claim was enough to startle the Pharisees who argued that Jesus’ self-claimed witness was “not true” (*ouk alethes*). According to the rules of evidence among the rabbis, “no man can give witness for himself.” Therefore two or more witnesses were needed to make a claim valid (Deut. 17:6; 19:15; 17:6). Jesus Christ answers and mentions *two* witnesses: The Father and Himself. That was an expression of the Triune Nature of God and

Jesus as the second person of Trinity (*Persona*). The Text reveals that God is the Prime Witness.

In John 8:15, Jesus is not only a “witness” but also a “Judge” who declares that “you judge according to the flesh...even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the ‘Father’”. Pharisees regarded Jesus as a mere man, seeing him in much outward human nature that cannot truly judge. Jesus used the word “flesh” (*sarx*) in a symbolic sense to denote human sinful nature, wicked views and judging persons according to the outward appearance. Historically, only true witness can judge as Deuteronomy 17:7 shows, “The hand of the witness shall be the first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people.” Jesus observed that Pharisees had a harsh judging attitude as indicated in John 8: 1-11 to punish an adulterous woman. Significantly, Jesus did not judge (Gr. *krino*) even if He is a true witness in His Divine nature. However, Jesus’ purpose or disposition was to bring light, life and safety (as Saviour) to the sinners and the oppressed.

Like witness of holding the testimony of two, the same principle is to practice fair judgment (John 8:14; 17). According to John 5:19: “the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.” Likewise, in John 8:17, the judgement is in reference to God and the Son of God; *which is* not according to the flesh. Here the judgment of Jesus is a genuine and authoritative one which reminds that He was in union with His Sender (God).

Pharisees’ sneering and testing manner was to ask “show *your father* unto us.” They may ask for Joseph the carpenter but were ignoring Christ particularly how it is possible to associate anyone with God and in this text how both Father and Son are united. In Pakistani Islamic context, calling God “father” is committing a grave sin and many converts have “Dared to Call God the Father” (*Bilqees Shekh*).

Conclusion

The Bible study based on John 8:12-20 reveals the blessed light to encourage true witness and testimony to bring justice and peace to the world. Historically, it has been observed that the Divinity of Christ, the universal message of the Gospel, and Jesus as the light to, and for all, were the most prominent debate topics in the 16th century (1580) in Asia, between the Christians and adherents of other religions. However, the religious dialogue and conversion seem critically difficult in the 21st century Asia. Witnessing Christ and the passing of the torch (light) to another are really challenging in the contemporary changing Asian contexts especially in an Islamic context of Pakistan where a Christian can be judged by flesh (on mere suspicion and suffer critically). Pakistan became a country where the courts suffer to declare the judgment even when Christians are innocent (Assia Bibi and Rimsha Masih Case). In various case studies in Asia, most people and officials stay inactive and uninterested in practicing true witnesses and judgment to protect the minority Christians in Asia. Though it is a faithful and peaceful relief that Jesus will witness for Christians who do not forsake His name, but it is not that easy to practice.

Questions

1. Whose responsibility is it to continue sharing the light of Christ in the silence and the fearful context of Asia?
2. How Asian Christians are threatened to lose testimony of Christ's light?
3. What is the new missiological method and strategic plan of the Church for witnessing Christ in contemporary Asia?

John 8:12 - 20

12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." 13 The Pharisees then said to him, "You are bearing witness to yourself; your testimony is not true." 14 Jesus answered, "Even if I do bear witness to myself, my testimony is true, for I know whence I have come and whither I am going, but you do not know whence I come or whither I am going. 15 You judge according to the flesh, I judge no one. 16 Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone that judge, but I and he[a] who sent me. 17 In your law it is written that the testimony of two men is true; 18 I bear witness to myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness to me." 19 They said to him therefore, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father also." 20 These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

The Light in the Darkness: Prophetic Witnessing to the Light, in Asia

John 8:12-20

- Rev. Dr. Ngur Liana*

1. Introduction

In several parts of Asia especially in Myanmar, the Buddhists have *Thadingyut* Festival (Festival of Lights), which marks the end of the Buddhist Lent. This festival, held on the full moon day of *Thadingyut*, lasts for three days during which houses and streets are festively decorated and illuminated. In this time, every house lit their candles to shine in darkness. This is one way of responding to a situation amidst darkness. Christians are called to be the light of the world by Jesus Christ who claims, “I am the light of the world.” The primary purpose of this Bible study is to present Jesus Christ as the Light of the world. The biblical background will be presented with the aim of making the theological meaning clear and identifying some theological issues. To make the theological reflections, a relevant methodology of *Shekhinah* model will be adopted out of its biblical foundation and background. In the light of this methodology, theological reflections will be made

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contextually. The conclusion is how the presence of Jesus, the light of the world, is significant for us today.

2. Biblical Background and Critique

Jesus' radical proclamation "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12) takes its roots in the wilderness wandering of the Israelite people. Gospel of John Chapters 6, 7, and 8 are related to the "wilderness wanderings" period of Israel's history. This is evident in the source of the metaphors that Jesus uses of Himself: (1) chapter 6 uses "manna" and "the bread of life"; (2) chapter 7 uses "water" and "living water"; (3) chapter 8 uses "light" and "Shekinah glory." This metaphor of light is repeated throughout John (cf. 1: 4-5, 8-9; 3:19-21; 9: 5; 12: 46).¹ Among the scholars there has been some debate as to exactly what this refers: (1) the ancient fear of darkness; (2) a title for God in the Old Testament (cf. Ps. 27:1; Isa. 62:20; I John 1:5); (3) the background of the Feast of the Tabernacles, lighting of the candelabra in the Court of the Women; (4) an allusion to the Shekinah cloud of glory in the wilderness wandering period that symbolized the presence of God; or (5) the Messianic titles in the Old Testament (cf. Isa. 42:6, 49:6; Luke 2:32).² All these can be metaphorically interpreted in the light of the contextual theological construction. "Of the world." This usage shows the universal scope of the gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. 3:16).

Jesus Christ is the Light of the world.

Jesus is the expected Messiah. The Rabbis also used "light" as a title for the Messiah. As to its context, the lighting of the huge lamps in the Court of the Women during the Feast of Tabernacle seems to be the obvious setting for Jesus' statement. The Messianic implications of light and the special references in 1:4, 8 coincide with the ceremony in the Temple for Jesus to continue to reveal His true origin.³ For those who believe Jesus is the light, and Christ is the image of the invisible

¹ . Bob Utley, *Gospel and The Letter of John*, East Texas Baptist University, 1996, 82

² . *Ibid*, 82.

³ . *Ibid*, 82.

God. As the sun enlightens the whole world; so does the Christ. Without the sun, a dungeon would be a dark world. So the world would be a dark world without Jesus. Consequently, those who follow Christ shall not walk in darkness. They shall not be left without the truths which are necessary to keep them from errors, and in the way of duty. As stated earlier, Jesus is the light, and by the power of His word, He entered as light into the conscience of those who are in darkness.

After introducing this biblical context, now we will reflect on it contextually. As Jesus enlightened the darkness in his time, what kind of darkness can we identify, to be enlightened in Asia today? To answer this question, we will adopt a relevant methodology.

3. Shekhinah Model

By *Shekhinah* model the author means “God’s glorious presence with his people in the midst of threat, persecution, oppression, hardships and difficulties”. The word *Shekhinah* means visible manifestation of God’s glory. While Scripture denies any permanent localization of God it does describe, simultaneously with his transcendence, his “glory”, or apprehensible presence. In the wilderness wandering of God, God is wandering with the Israelites, God’s *Shekinah* concerns the cloud, which surrounded the glory (40:34), like thunderheads through which lightning flashes (19:9, 16). The reason why the author adopts is as stated in the background John 8 uses “light” and “Shekinah glory”. In addition, this conceptualizes Jesus’ claim, “I am the light of the world”, as “a light in the darkness”. This model will highlight not only God’s journeying together with his people, but also God’s guidance towards Christians in their journey together with other religions and amidst contemporary issues. As God was in the midst of the Israelite people who were wandering in the wilderness, so is God in the midst of the suffering of the people of Myanmar.

Jesus is the light of the world because God the Father is in Him. He also did what God the Father wanted him to do. In Asia, generally our concept of mission still remains in the traditional mission paradigm which is exclusive, narrow and outdated. To update our mission

paradigm with the aims of Journeying Together not only with Christians, but also with other religions, the author thinks that ‘prophetic model’ will be the most relevant. In the light of this model, we will make theological reflections on the social, political, economic, religious and ecological issues in Asia.

4. Reflections: Prophetic Witnessing to the Light, in the Myanmar Context

In the light of *Shekhinah* model, I would like to make theological and biblical reflections on Asia. In our text, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” God is in Jesus and Jesus is the One who shines in the darkness. But the Pharisees did not accept him because they failed to see Jesus as God. In the debate, Jesus corrected the views of the Pharisees. Similarly, in Asian context, the same thing may happen. As Jesus gradually transformed, the *Shekhinah* model expects that with the glorious presence of Jesus Christ who enlightens the world, the transformation of the religious, social, economic, political and ecological issues in Asia will continue to be an ongoing process.

4.1. Religious issues

Asia is multi-religious continent where Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims and other religious adherents live and journey together. The same is the situation in Myanmar. When anti-conversion entered into the religious context, the entire religious communities in Myanmar were in turmoil and in darkness. *Shekhinah* model sees that Asia enjoys peaceful co-existence of all religions today in the midst of various religions. The light shines in the darkness. In the midst of difficulties, the people of Myanmar feel the glorious presence of God. Today, in several Asian countries, we build models of journeying together in terms of inter-faith cooperation in the midst of religious intolerance.

Within Christianity, intra-religious division has been one of the problems. The gap between the mainline Churches and other new generation churches must be bridged with the aim of revitalizing ecumenism. Asian Christianity needs corrections as Jesus corrects the Pharisees.

4.2 Social issues

Today, Asia is not free from social sins, too. Out of several issues, I would like to single out the problem of ethnicity which brings darkness in almost all Asian countries. This darkness is the error to be corrected prophetically in the light of the Gospel. In some areas, ethnic conflicts destroyed peace and lots of people are internally displaced within their country and beyond. This brings hell here and now. *Shekhinah* model sees that Asia needs Jesus Christ who shines in the darkness of the social sins. In addition, *Shekhinah* model invites all ethnicities and churches to journey together in the light of Christ, building peaceful coexistence of all ethnic groups and maintaining brotherhood of all in Jesus Christ which will consequently shed light and bring about transformation of ethnic conflicts. In other words, this darkness must be lighted by Jesus Christ who is the light of the world. In this context, peace with justice is the light that guides us not only to life on earth but also to eternal life.

4.3 Economic issues

Shekhinah model sees that unjust economic system which brings darkness must be lighted by the glorious presence of Jesus Christ. Economically, in the past, Asia had seemed richest nations. But today, Asian countries are economically disadvantaged. The main reason of poverty in these countries is due to the unjust economic system and the unequal distribution of natural resources. It is recognized that poverty is the root cause of all forms of corruptions and the Church oversimplifies this reality. Christian theology, in the light of Jesus' teachings, has to address the root cause of poverty and challenge the unjust economic system which victimizes the people in our country. This is our prophetic witness in our journeying together.

Shekhinah model is one of the most significant prophetic witnesses to the light because it can build a platform for Christians to journey together. Within Christianity, one of the most notorious problems is financial corruption. Several Churches encounter a large number of financial problems. This brings discords, misunderstanding and hell here and now. In this corrupted context, Christians cannot journey together. This darkness must be lighted by the teaching of Jesus so that

all Christians may be able to journey together peacefully. Those who follow Jesus Christ must be free from financial corruptions, not working in the darkness. In this sense, Jesus Christ is the light in the daily life of a believer, of the world and Asia as well.

5. Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, this Bible study reinterprets Jesus Christ as the Light of the world, in particular, in Asian context. The Biblical background has been introduced for making theological critique and identifying some theological issues. Out of several possible methods, *Shekhinah* model was chosen as a method to make theological reflections. The terms ‘of this world’ mean ‘universal scope of the Gospel of Christ, it covers the entire universe. As the glorious presence of God in the midst of the wilderness wandering was meaningful, so is the presence of Jesus Christ who enlightens the world prepares a platform to journey together and to witness to the light and truth in the midst of persecution, oppressions and marginalization and religious intolerance in Asia, Christ is promising and ensuring eternal life for those who follow Him. ‘

Questions

1. How do we understand the claim of Jesus ‘I am the light of the world?’”
2. What is prophetic witness in Asia and in other similar contexts?
3. How will the light help us to journey together in Asia?

John 14:1-14

“Let not your hearts be troubled; believe [a] in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4 And you know the way where I am going.” [b] 5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” 6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. 7 If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him.”

8 Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.” 9 Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves.

12 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father. 13 Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; 14 if you ask[c] anything in my name, I will do it.

Jesus Christ : The Way to Home, the Way of Truth and the Way to be Walked

John 14: 1-14

- Rev. Sam Koshy Thalathayil *

Introduction

The Korean film *THE WAY HOME*, by the director Lee Jeong -Hyang, is about the relation between a village grandmother and her city born grandson. Interestingly they find it difficult to communicate through a common language. But they share love, way of life and truthful living that in the end the grandson learns the symbolic language of the world of the grandmother. Similarly, it is surprising to note that though the disciples were with Jesus Christ for a long time, many a time they were unable to understand his symbolic language or narrative or discourse.

The farewell discourse of Jesus as depicted in St. John 14 is a conversation which is misunderstood by the disciples. It is important to acknowledge the mistake that during the colonial period this passage was interpreted in a polemical way. Yet this passage can be theologically reflected in a new hermeneutical way in the context of the theme-

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‘Journeying Together: Prophetic Witness to the Truth and Light, in Asia’. This bible study attempts 1) to locate the prophetic witness as an eschatological act above the historical text, 2) to decipher the theological content of the usage ‘I am the Way, Truth and Life’ in the context of Asian realities; and 3) to argue for a Christian way of life as Witnessing Truth.

Jesus Christ : The Way to Home

St. John. 14. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

These words of Jesus are about the eternal home. The theme of eternal home runs through the bible (Rev 21: 2- 4; Heb 11: 13-17, and 2 Corinthians 5:1-5vv). The eschatological home seems to be the logic behind all the worship. One can note that the slaves went out of Egypt to have an eschatological experience in the worship (Exod. 5:1). Jesus recalls the theme of eternal home as an eschatological formation of the church (John 14:1-4). But this understanding of eschaton is to move beyond the logic of the ‘present’. Or the bible does not recommend hedonistic celebration of here and now, as the consumer culture imbibes it. An eschatology, which is critical to the absolutising of the present, is the rubrics behind the Christian hope. In the book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann says that

“Hope, on one hand, is an absurdity too embarrassing to speak about, for it flies in the face of all those claims we have been told are facts. Hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality which is the majority opinion; and one does that only at great political and existential risk. On the other hand, hope is subversive, for it limits the grandiose pretension of the present, daring to announce that the present to which we have all made commitments is now called into question.”

Therefore, we can say that the words of Jesus about the eternal home (vv1-4) turned as absurd to the ears of Philip and other disciples. These

words of hope by Jesus have to be told again and again in the Asian context of neo-colonization, crazy hedonistic celebrations of the present and 'right wing' populism of easy political hopes in Asia. The narrative of eternal home prepared by Jesus is to engage with the historical realities in an ethical way. Thus, eschatological is the imperative to be prophetically historical. Unfortunately, the disciples could not get it and the church in history many a time failed to emulate it. We are reminded that the colonial masters were too historical that they captured everything; the feudal lords were too metaphysically ahistorical that people of Asia find it confusing to understand the ever-present questions of caste or ethnicity or gender discrimination; and the contemporary hedonism supported by the philosophy of market wants to celebrate the 'present'. Therefore, the words of Jesus in the context of Asia would mean the subversive dream of eschaton leading to prophetic action in order to undo the unjust systems and counter the discourses which manufacture the consent for the evils of the present. This prophetic encounter of the historical, by and through the logic of the eschatological, would make the uniqueness of the witnessing Christ effective, in the journey together with other religions.

Jesus Christ: The Way of Truth

St. John 14.4. "And you know the way to the place where I am going."
⁵ *Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* ⁶ *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* ⁷ *If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."* ⁸ *Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father; and we will be satisfied."* ⁹ *Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"* ¹⁰ *Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?"*

The verses from 4 to 10 are questions of the way, the truth and the life. In this case, the disciple Thomas articulates the misunderstanding or the lacking of the sharing of the same linguistic and symbolic world of Jesus Christ. When Thomas says that they are not sure of the place, the

following reply of Jesus is special. The reply connects the way, the truth and the life. The question of ‘way’ is connected to the question of ‘truth’, which in turn is the question of ‘life’. We have to remember the Hebrew parallelism and poetical prose of the Palestinian context, to understand this verse in which Jesus says that he is the “way, truth and the life”. Use of these three words can mean to repeat the same content as in poetry. The Judeo – Christian tradition considers the three expressions, the ‘way, the truth and the life’, as connected and interrelated. Interestingly, these three expressions are the key words in almost all of the Asian religions. Therefore, because of the interrelatedness of these three words Judeo-Christian tradition can better be engaged with the Asian context in the journey of prophetic witness with other religions. So, these three words are not disconnected, as modernity and colonial masters took it.

The question of ‘the truth, the life and the way’ is also a Trinitarian question. God, in Christian theology, is not monotheism or tri-theism. God as the Holy Trinity is better understood as divine relatedness. This is a special point of dialogue with the many religious communities, such as Islam in Asia. Jesus Christ belongs to the God-head. This is the truth of Christian faith. In the Semitic understanding, ‘Truth’, denotes a relationship. The divine truth is a divine relationship. The relationship of God in Christ and Christ in God therein becomes the standard of truth. The question asked by Pilate to Jesus what ‘Truth’ is, worthy to be remembered here. This question is about the relationship of Jesus to God the Father. Jesus affirms that God is in Jesus and Jesus is God. Here “truth” is not of an objective reality as in the case of modern natural science, but it is about relationship or it is ontological. Therefore, abiding in God implies being related to God of justice, which in turn means a prophetic relationship. In the Christian tradition, prophetic and mystical are well connected.

C. S Lewis argued in *The Great Divorce* that, “There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him.”

Therefore, the question of relation to God is not to find an uncontaminated essence rather it is the relationship with God of justice which in turn is intrinsically prophetic. Truth as relationship with God of life in a way of justice is the epitome in Jesus the Christ, Son of God. This is what is meant by the saying of Jesus that, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” To compromise this point for political correctness will be suicidal for Christian faith and on the other hand to interpret it as an exclusivist claim would be a heresy to the authentic content of the bible.

Jesus Christ : The Way to be Walked

St. John 14. 10. “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

The verses from 14.10 to 14.14 of St. John are from the third part of the discourse. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, sharing relationship in the Godhead. But at the same time disciples have to emulate Jesus Christ as the way to be walked. In this sense, Jesus envisages the disciples to do greater long walks as work of justice. Thus walking the way of justice and compassion is the divine dignity to the disciples. Christian understanding of God is not a ‘slave – master’ relation; rather it is a ‘family’ relationship. It is to say that Jesus Christ, the elder, expects that the rest of the family can do more. In this regard Jesus Christ is not a proposition to be declared, as wrongly interpreted in the colonial mission and in the contemporary populist Christian religiosity. It is a *dharma* to be practiced in the vocabulary of ‘Hinduism’ or ‘way of diligence’ to be observed in Buddhist understanding. The way of Jesus being prophetic and eschatological cannot accept any and every local or global culture which negates life and truth. To think Jesus as a super highway of loose morality and relativized ethics is to undo the

quintessence of faith. St. Mathew 7. 13-14 say that life in the truth of Jesus is a narrow way. We can very well remember that Nathan, Isaiah and John the Baptist walked in the narrow way of prophetic witness. But 'narrow' is not in the radical sense of fundamentalist assertions. Jesus Christ is the narrow way of prophetic imagination to be walked in fellowship with God, giving healing and dignity to all through the fellowship of forgiveness, compassion, justice and peace. As any good walking can have a fall, the prophetic journey should have a double check with God. Hence walking the way of Jesus is to live in a deep relationship with God. Constant conversation and communion with God is the synergy in the prophetic goal of life.

Questions:

1. How to read the eschatological imperative of the passage to the prophetic encounter with the historical situations of Asia?
2. How to interpret 'I am the way, the truth and the life' in the multi religious context of Asia without negating the specificity of revelation in Jesus Christ and without devaluing the particular God experience of the people of Asia?
3. To believe in Jesus Christ is to journey in the way of prophetic witness in Asia. What are the challenges in reading the text, in the context of pre-meditated violence and growing right wing populism?

John 14:1-14

“Let not your hearts be troubled; believe [a] in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4 And you know the way where I am going.” [b] 5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” 6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. 7 If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him.”

8 Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.” 9 Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves.

12 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father. 13 Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; 14 if you ask[c] anything in my name, I will do it.

Jesus and The IDPs in Myanmar

John 14: 1-14

- *Dr. Naw Eh Tar Gay**

1. Introduction

One of the burning issues in Asia is that of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). About 400,000 are in southeastern Myanmar while over 100,000 are in the refugee camps in Thailand. The UN plans to relocate them in Myanmar. However, many of them do not want to come back while some have already returned.¹ There are also around 100,000 in Kachin and northern Shan State while there are 140,000 Rohingya refugees in Rakhaine State. The Government has built some IDP camps for them.² However, Kachin IDPs also are longing to return to their homes. Some churches are exhausted by taking care of those

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¹. *Situation Analysis Southeastern Myanmar, Myanmar Information Management Unit, Peace Support Fund, September 2016, 117.*

². *BNI, Peace Monitor, Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees, [article online] available at <http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/conflict/idps-and-refugees>, internet accessed on 28, 5.2017.*

IDPs. Where will Karen refugees in the camps of Thailand –Myanmar border go? If the UN does not arrange for their places in Western countries, will Myanmar government arrange their settlement in their original home land? Which country will accept the Rhohingyas? Either Bangladesh or Myanmar? Or neither of them? Will the military and ethnic armed groups stop fighting so that the Kachin IDPs can go back to their home without burdening their fellow Kachin churches?

2. Biblical Background of the Text and its meaning

Verses John 14:1-14 deal with the issue of the assurance of “places” for the believers. Jesus is the one who assures that there are places for the believers. Traditionally most Christians in Myanmar read this passage in the funeral service for comforting bereaved families. The believers are repeatedly reminded that Jesus is now preparing places for them and that place is believed to be for life after death. Here Jesus tells us that He is going to the place where there is God. Everyone who wants to be there should take the way, the truth and the life of Jesus. Is this text only about life after death and heaven? According Fernando F. Segovia, “The Gospel of John primarily is religious in character, but is also a text with strong geopolitical pre-occupations and ramifications.”³ If the text has geopolitical character, is there other meaning for the place that Jesus prepares? Why did John write that Jesus is preparing a place for the believers? For life after death or here and now on earth?

2.1 The Jesus Community

According to Craig S. Keener, the Gospel of John was written in the mid-nineties, during the reign of Domitian. It was a time of the division between Johannine community and the synagogue community.⁴ Some scholars say that the recipients of the Gospel were, the Jews in Roman Asia, Alexandria, Egypt or Syro-Palestine region.⁵ These proposals

³ . Fernando F.Segovia “*The Gospel of John*”, *A Postcolonial commentary on New Testament Writings* , (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 157. Hereafter cited as “Segovia”

⁴ . Craig S.Keener, *The Gospel of John Commentary, Vol I*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 140, 142, Hereafter cited as “Keener”

confirm that these Jews were in the Diaspora. According to Josephus these diaspora Jews settled in those regions before or after the war of 66-73, and many migrated to other regions.⁶

Warren Carter also confirms that Jews were the diaspora, as Jewish synagogue community in Asia. Then what we can identify is that community in the gospel of John is what Warren Carter quoted Tat-Siong Benny Liew's as "a struggle for community" and Benedict Anderson's "imagines community." John portrayed the community which was in the city of Ephesus, which was dealing with not just private and spiritual matters but also with political and societal affairs. They did not just oppose but also accommodated themselves to the society. They talked about eternal life but they had to live each day and conduct their daily affairs in Rome's world.⁷ When the war broke between Rome and the Jews in 66 CE and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, there was also violence against Jews in Syria and Alexandria (J.W.2.457-498). The hatred of the Jews was also highest during that time. However, the gogue community in Ephesus felt very much at home and accommodated themselves to Roman power.⁸ The people under the Roman Empire did not dare to revolt against the Roman power because whenever they revolted they were suppressed. Therefore, the synagogue community might have chosen the way of accommodation. This reveals the reality of the Empire and its subjects.⁹ However, the community that comprised of believers in Jesus (the Jesus Community) there raised their voice and resisted both the Synagogue community and the Roman power which caused the division between synagogue community and Jesus community.¹⁰

⁵ . Keener, 143.

⁶ . Keener, 144.

⁷ . Warren Carter, *John and Empire, Initial Explorations* (New York. London: T & T Clark, 2008), 10. Hereafter cited as "Carter"

⁸ . Carter, 37.

⁹ . Carter, 78.

¹⁰ . Carter, 45.

Lance Byron Richey also discusses the reasons of the conflicts between the synagogue community and Jesus community. For him, from the early part of first century, the Palestinian Jews in the synagogue followed John the Baptist and later Jesus (John 1:6-8, 19-36). They remained in the synagogue and persuaded other Jews (John 1: 35-49).¹¹ Through the evangelizing, the community soon collected the homilies used in this activity, which became gospel of signs. Then for them Jesus became the prophet-Messiah promised by Moses. This led to the conflict in Synagogue. In the 80s, the elevation of Christ led to the conflict with synagogue community which held the monotheistic view. There was excommunication and persecution of members of Christians.¹² This led to harassment and persecution by Roman authorities at the instigation of the synagogue Jews. The Jesus community became dangerous for both Roman religious custom and Roman political power.¹³ Due to the rejection of the Jewish synagogues, the community moved to Gentile communities which also rejected them and showed inhospitality.¹⁴ In summary, the Jesus community in the first century had conflicts with both the synagogue community and also Roman authority while they were away from their homeland. They were under persecution and distress.

2.2 Many Rooms and Abode

Did the Jesus community have a feeling that they were homeless or had a particular place in mind to go during that time? Is that the place which Jesus is preparing? Father's house in John 14: 2 is defined differently as heaven or temple or house of peace.¹⁵ Greek word *monh* has occurred only twice - in John 14:2 and 23. John 14:2 mentions that Jesus is going to prepare a *monh* where there will be God and in 14: 23, God and Jesus will come to dwell in *monh* with the people. Here it confirms that *monh* is a place where God is with his people if it

¹¹ . Lance Byron Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, (Washington DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2007), 5-7. Hereafter cited as "Richey."

¹² . Richey, 8.

¹³ . Richey, 13.

¹⁴ . Richey, 25-26.

¹⁵ . Keener, 932

is here or somewhere else.¹⁶ Although there are different views on interpreting the meaning of place or preparing of that place as eschatology or spiritual place, by alluding to Rev 12:6, the place can also be a place which is prepared for the people who are suffering and that is the place with divine protection. It is clear that Jesus promises it.¹⁷

For Richey, during the time of persecution, the Jesus community developed the ideas that Christ was a stranger from heaven (John 3: 31). They held the dualistic view between the world below, which persecuted Christ and Christians, and the world above, which is the home of Jesus and the Jesus community.¹⁸ Segovia also affirms that there are two worlds which are “this world” and “the other world”. The “this world” is the world that hated God and committed ‘sin’ and the ruler of this world put Jesus to death. The “other world” is the place where Jesus came from and is going back to. In this text, we are studying, Jesus “is going to the Father’s house and will prepare rooms for the disciples and he will come back to fetch them so that they can be all together in the other world.”¹⁹ The agents of this world steal, destroy and kill but the agent from the other world brings fullness of life (John 10:10). The text continues that the community in this world shall not be left orphans. God will send also the Spirit of Truth. Jesus and God will come and will live with them.²⁰ Here Segovia’s discussion is similar to Keener’s on the word *monh*. That is the place where God is and to where Jesus is going and preparing rooms for the Jesus community. There will be a place among the Jewish community in this world where God will come to dwell. It means both the places in this world and in the other world are good, because there will be God, His provision and protection.

¹⁶ . Keener, 935-936.

¹⁷ . Keener, 936-937.

¹⁸ . Richey, 8.

¹⁹ . Segovia, 183.

²⁰ . Segovia, 184.

2.3 Jesus: The Way, the Truth and the Life

The way of God in Jewish wisdom tradition is truth and life (Prov. 2; 19; 3:2, 16, 18; 4:10,13, 22). Jesus is also God's truth, and who brings life to them.²¹ John portrays the alternative mission of Jesus against empire. He is the one who reveals God Himself and God's will. He is the light of the world, God entrusts all things to Jesus such as actions/work (John 14:10). The goal of His mission is wholeness and abundant life.²² Seeing Jesus is seeing God (John 14:7-9). As Moses, Jesus has seen God fully. That is seeing the work of God done for the people as God has done for the Israelites people in the wilderness. Seeing Jesus is seeing God as God dwells in Jesus and Jesus does the will of God (John 14:10-11).²³ Here using the Father in the text is not to gender God as male. Rather John is portraying God as Father who is totally different from the so-called fathers: i.e. Roman emperors. Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, through this way people will be with God and have wholeness and abundant life.

2.4 Greater work by the Disciples

The mission of wholeness and abundant life is entrusted to his community (John 14:12). The disciples were also encouraged that they also will do greater work than what Jesus did. They will be rewarded with joy and their prayers in the name of Jesus will be answered (John 14:12-14). These disciples will be hated by the world as they will bring people to have wholeness and abundant life²⁴ while the world is stealing, killing and destroying the Jesus community.

3. Reflections

According to the text, Jesus is preparing the 'safe place' called *monh*. A *monh* indicates a place where there are God's joy, peace and

²¹ . Keener, 943

²² . Carter, 80-81.

²³ . Keener, 943-950.

²⁴ . Segovia, 157.

wholeness and abundant life and fullness of life. Moreover, before reaching that place, if the Jesus community is doing God's will, God will come and make a dwelling place among them. Is the presence of God making every place a safe place? If all places are safe places, whether the IDPs or refugees should go back to their own place or stay where they are now? In creating a safe-place, the participation of the churches and the Christians as disciples play very crucial roles. Even ceasing civil wars and holding peace talks between government and ethnic armed groups should be the first step in creating safe place. In order to speed up the relocation or the return of refugees into Myanmar, peace processes should be speeded up. Many needs of the returned refugees should be met. Safety and fullness of life of the refugees who remain in Thailand should be also considered seriously. Jesus entrusts all Christians as His disciples or agents of change to do greater work than He does. It is our ecumenical call today.

Questions

1. How do you respond to this alternative reading of John 14: 1-14?
2. If you see the safe place Jesus promised, how will you locate (include) safe places for the Internally Displaced Peoples in this life here and now?
3. What is the role of the church in creating homes for IDPs or refugees in Asia?
4. In what way will the churches in Asia do greater work in making peace between government and insurgency groups?
5. As Christians, how are we going to make prophetic witness to the Truth and Light in the context of internal displacements, human trafficking and forced migrations etc.?

John 18:28-30

Then they led Jesus from the house of Ca'iaphas to the praetorium. It was early. They themselves did not enter the praetorium, so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the passover. 29 So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" 30 They answered him, "If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have handed him over." 31 Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death." 32 This was to fulfil the word which Jesus had spoken to show by what death he was to die. 33 Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" 35 Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?" 36 Jesus answered, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world." 37 Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." 38 Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

John 20:21-22

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

Truth, Peace and Mission

John 18: 28-38 & 20: 21-22

- Prof. Dr. Victor Aguilan*

In John's gospel, the scene of Jesus' appearance before Pilate unfolds in course of time. Jesus' mission inevitably led to a face-to-face encounter with Pilate, the representative of the Imperial power in Palestine. Jesus is led bound, from Caiaphas' house to Pilate's headquarters on the day of preparation for Passover.

At the outset of John's narrative, the evangelist specifies that the Jews did not enter the praetorium so as not to incur legal impurity which would prevent them from celebrating the Passover on that very evening (18.24, 28).

Now, since the questioning of Jesus must necessarily be conducted inside the praetorium, there follows a series of the scene changes in which Pilate continuously goes out of the praetorium to argue with the Jews, then reenters to interrogate Jesus. Pilate asks what accusation they bring against Jesus. Rather than stating the charges, the religious leaders responded that they had already established that Jesus was a criminal. Pilate answers that, if the religious leaders found Jesus guilty, they should also punish him. However, the religious leaders wanted

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Pilate to execute Jesus because he was not only guilty of a religious crime but also of a political one.

If Jesus is to die a Roman death, he must be a threat to Rome as a subversive. Pilate must question Jesus to determine if he is one (John 18:33-38). “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate asks. Jesus answered “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

Another way of saying this is to state that the royal power of Jesus does not belong to the world from below; it is not founded on constraint or violence, it does not lean on another earthly power, but it comes “from above” (19,11), from God alone.

However, it should also be pointed out that Jesus’ kingdom was not apolitical or indifferent to the Roman Empire. Rather, when seen in conjunction with his ministry as a whole, Jesus was offering a different politics to Roman imperial politics. The language of “kingdom” itself indicates that Jesus understood himself to be posing a contrast between his community and Rome. According to Jesus, God’s Kingdom is a Kingdom based on TRUTH.

Jesus is a different kind of a king, rejecting militarism and hoarding of wealth that characterized emperors. He advocates inclusiveness, humility, and mercy—all in contrast to how the Roman leaders lord it over them.

v.37 “You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “”You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Jesus offers Pilate to listen to his testimony and be part of the truth, but Pilate dismisses Jesus’ answer to his question, “What is truth?” Moreover, with this, he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no case against him.”

Despite the truth of Jesus' innocence, Pilate condemned Jesus to death. Pilate did what was convenient, rather than upholding the truth. Instead of listening to the voice of his conscience, the truth, he chose to silence Jesus. For him, the measure of truth was the Roman Empire: its global power, its conquests, and subjugation of many people and the total exploitation of the occupied people. There was no greater truth than that. By rejecting the truth, Pilate commits the ultimate cruelty and permits the death of the innocent one. To deny the truth is to commit injustice. And any act of injustice entails a denial of truth.

However, truth cannot remain hidden. You cannot kill truth. Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus after the Empire killed him is the most powerful message. Empire uses the fear of death to control the dominated population. As long as people know that Rome can destroy and kill them, as long as they know that Pilate has no scruples condemning an innocent man and killing him, people will be afraid and desperate. They will submit to Imperial power because they fear torture and death. Resurrection and the greeting of peace subvert the Imperial power and make the story of Jesus' resurrection dangerous to Rome.

v.21: Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The mission of the disciples proceeds from the Easter event (cf. Mt. 28,16-20; Mk 16, 15-20; Lk 24,44-49; Ac 1,7-8); but John sees it as deriving from the entire mission of Jesus (17,17-19). The peace that Jesus offers is not the same as *Pax Romana*, which is based on violence, fear, conquest, and death. Jesus' peace brings life and hope. Jesus' resurrection also exposes those who lie, deceive and suppress the truth and those who are real threats to genuine peace. Jesus hopes that His followers will be an instrument of peace – not violence or war.

v.22: And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit". It evokes the first creation of human (Gen 2:7) and suggests that we are dealing here with a new creation, with a genuine resurrection (as in Ez 37: 9; cf. also Rm 4:17). Thus, the Spirit will be the power of salvation which enables the disciples to carry on the mission of Jesus.

Reflection

1. Jesus' confrontation with Pilate, a truth-denier exposes the actual violence of empire toward any and all perceived threats. Despite the truth of Jesus' innocence, Pilate condemned Jesus to death. To reject truth is to commit injustice. With social media, internet and other means of telecommunication, truth should be more accessible today. But what we are seeing is the exact opposite. We live in a day that not only denies truth, but is against truth. What we have today are the increasing censorship and the proliferation of "fake news". Some government officials, leaders of corporations including religious institutions have employed deception, disinformation, and suppression of the truth. Many seek power, domination, money, control, military might, political rule, and fame—anything but the truth. They have lied to people and subverted the truth just to remain in power just like Pilate.

In Asia, there are many issues that powerful groups – politicians, corporations, State, and religious leaders – want to remain buried or distorted. But there is one issue that Churches in Asia must address. It is the reality of climate change. Despite irrefutable evidence from around the world—including extreme weather events, record temperatures, melting glaciers and rising sea levels—all point to the fact that climate change is happening now and at rates much faster than previously thought, there are powerful people like Pres. Trump, who deny that climate change exists or that humans are causing it. Trump recently has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement on climate change, a commitment to limit global warming. We know that many countries in Asia are vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Whether climate impacts for a particular place are worst or mild, one thing is certain: the poor will suffer more than the others. The reason is simple and straightforward: they are poor. Denying the truth of climate change will result in climate injustice.

Followers of Jesus, of all people, should be unremitting critics of those who deny the truth and those who peddle "alternative truths" whenever they arise. Christians in Asia cannot close their eyes to the truth. We are called to bear witness to the TRUTH. Like Jesus, Churches in Asia must be ready to face today's Pilate(s).

However, before encountering the authorities, we need to be informed. The more informed the Churches are, the better they can face the authorities of this world. Reliable information depends largely on the capacity to gather it. Governments, corporations, and powerful groups have the tendency to be unduly secretive and insufficiently concerned about communicating what they are doing. Here churches have a vital role to fulfill, not only for their members but also to the public at large. With their available resources, they can gather the much-needed information and share the information to guide the general public. Access to the truth is vital in the pursuit of justice and peace.

2. The Gospel story of Jesus, of course, does not end with his execution. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God reveals that the truth cannot remain buried. It explains the mission of the disciples. Jesus said, "Peace be with you; As the Father has sent me, so I send you." God sends Christ in mission to the world, and Christ, in turn, sends the Church in mission to the world. But, in what does this mission consist?

This is a challenge to Asian Christians considering that Asia is the home of some of the world's great living religions. Christian mission and the proclamation of Christian 'truth' may not have always led to peace but conflict. Asian Christians are acutely aware that some of these conflicts have been abetted if not aggravated by religions, flaring up in open armed conflicts and bloody repression as in Indonesia between Muslims and Christians; the armed conflict in Southern Thailand between its military and Muslim militants, the communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in India; and between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

The risen Jesus has sent his followers to be an instrument of peace. Witnessing to the truth will lead to peace. The center and heart of the Church's mission, which is God's mission, is to proclaim God's reconciling love to humanity and creation which Jesus has ushered. Hence, Church's mission in Asia, as her master, is to proclaim the truth that leads to peace. Jesus made peace with God for the entire human community and commissioned the church to convey his peace.

Questions

1. “What is Truth?” When is truth prophetic? When is it liberating? How can Christians in Asia be a witness to the truth in the face of fake news, “alternative facts” and lies of the powerful?
2. Jesus said, “Peace be with you; As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” How can the Church’s proclamation of the Truth lead to peace? In what ways?

John 18:28-30

Then they led Jesus from the house of Ca'iaphas to the praetorium. It was early. They themselves did not enter the praetorium, so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the passover. 29 So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" 30 They answered him, "If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have handed him over." 31 Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death." 32 This was to fulfil the word which Jesus had spoken to show by what death he was to die. 33 Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" 35 Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?" 36 Jesus answered, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world." 37 Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." 38 Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

John 20:21-22

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**To Whom do You Bend Your Knee in Times of
Darkness? Re-Discovering God's Faithfulness for
Prophetic Witness in Asia**

John 18: 28-38 & 20: 21-22

*- Rt. Rev. Dr. Daniel S. Thiagarajah**

Introduction

John's gospel is clear: our calling is to worship God as the source of our freedom and that 'all things came into being through God's Word' (John 1:4). John proclaims unequivocally that our worship of the Word is a life and death matter (John 1:5). So, in this Bible study, I also testify to how God's faithfulness in the life and death struggles of my life and ministry has re-formed me and renewed me as a prophetic witness to the Truth and Life in Asia.

The greatest personal challenge of my life and ministry was how to trust the light of life when the darkness threatened to take my life. I believe this is where our study will take us if we are being called by the sovereign Word to prophetic witness to the Word's truth and life.

** Rt. Rev. Dr. Daniel S Thiagarajah is Bishop of the Jaffna Diocese of the CSI in Sri Lanka*

Biblical background

The darkness spoken of in John 8:12 is revealed in chapter 18 to be the darkness of violence and death, and this is the darkness that encloses Jesus as he stands before Pilate. The darkness solidifies around the religious establishment's collusion with the pagan Roman Empire (John 18:28), collusion for the sole purpose of protecting privileges that Jewish leaders had extracted from their conquerors (John 11:50). The gospel's silence about the absence of witnesses for Jesus highlights how the forces of darkness isolate Jesus and reveal the depth of his abandonment.

The power of darkness even de-stabilizes Pilate. For a moment, the Roman governor is on trial, and we see how shallow he is (John 18:38). The only power Pilate has to save his position is to order Jesus' crucifixion. This final step is only taken after the Jewish leaders abandon their faith and declare allegiance to the pagan Emperor-god. 'We have no king but the emperor' (John 19:15). Their blasphemy seals what they believed was their God-given 'mission', to ensure the survival of their religious community. Blinded by their idolatry, they succumb to the worship of the pagan Emperor-god to achieve their religious purpose. They are bought into the self-serving ideology of 'Pax-Romana', believing they can only achieve their mission to maintain their religious community under the 'peace' provided by the violence of the pagan Roman Empire.

John 18:28-38 helps us understand the Hebrew tradition of prophetic witness in which Jesus stood. In the face of the religious leaders' idolatry, Jesus' stand before Pilate is prophetic. Unlike the religious leaders, Jesus does not bow to the pagan empire and its ideology of peace through violent conquest. He asserts that his mission is not grounded in this world and its politics (John 18:36), indeed, his life and mission is from God. Prophetic witness begins with resistance to idolatry and the absolute claims of militarism, nationalism, racism and more.

Theological Reflections

Today, the modern world's Enlightenment faith in rational reasoning that underpins globalised economies and western powers is raised to the level of idolatry. Pilate's question 'what is truth?' (John 18:38) is today answered by science and technology: ultimate truth is found in 'facts'. Perhaps the decline of western churches is the result of their captivity to western culture's faith in science and growth to secure their status and prosperity? Our Diocese too often feels the burden of this captivity in our relationship with western mission partners. The truth of our common calling to prophetic witness in Christ seems too easily buried beneath western priorities of corporate governance, risk management, fiduciary responsibility, and national foreign policy dictates.

When John juxtaposes walking in darkness with having the light of life, he is witnessing to the truth that life in Christ (John 8:12) is stronger than the power of death. Yet Jesus is threatened with the most violent form of death, which serves the Empire's purpose of keeping conquered peoples in the darkness of fear and subservience. After five days in a coma, resulting from an assassination attempt on my life, I knew in an intensely personal way the fear that death-dealing violence evokes. I had received massive blows to the forehead, and a powerful machete blow to the leg. The hospital authorities said my chance of survival was 5 per cent. My life was in total darkness. But the gospel of Christ's light promises to transform the darkness. How?

Only later I learned of the fervent prayer of my pastors, my family and friends, ecumenical colleagues, and partners around the world. The response of JDCSI pastors is unequivocal in their shared belief about what had happened. Many of them testified that a miracle of God's grace had restored their Bishop to life. **Through their prayer, the darkness which enclosed me was penetrated with the light of life.** Christ's transforming light was not overcome (John 1:5). I am a witness with John to the hiddenness of Christ's light at work in prayer, even in what appears to be total darkness.

Like the disciples who gathered in fear of those who used violence to achieve their aims, my mind was in turmoil. A good friend reassured me of my need to rest, and he promised to look into events that surfaced in my troubling memories. It was comforting, just as Jesus' words to his traumatized followers addressed their fears. 'Peace be with you' (John 20:19). What treasure there is in the transforming light of comfort and peace, given in such acts of solidarity!

Then Jesus showed his disciples his hands and his side (John 20:20), his wounds from violence and hatred, that now reveal the wholeness of resurrected life. My wife Thaya told me one morning I was talking in delirium (my sleep). She urged me to tell her what I could remember. With her gentle prompting, I first remembered a motorbike, then the pillion rider, and finally the man behind the rider who tried to stop my car. What grace God has given me that my wife had the courage and strength to listen to the pain-filled fear and hatred that inflicted my wounds, and by her acceptance, begins God's work of holistic healing.

How shall the church minister do justice in this violent and fearful world? Only God's people have the courage and faith to listen and respond compassionately to the wounds inflicted by those who hold onto power for their own security. What do we do in our mission conferences to nurture such courage and strength? Or does the importance of our mission push aside the human cost to those who attend to the wounds of prophetic witness?

Then Jesus spoke a miraculous truth. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:21-22). For the disciples, the blessing of Christ's peace was miracle enough. They had shown themselves to be weak and overwhelmed with fear in betraying their Lord to face alone the death-dealing power of Empire. They hid away in fear and shame, at their manifold sins. Yet Jesus had come to them – broken into their fear-filled shame – and blessed them. Then it is as if Jesus says, 'I too was emptied of my power. I too was defeated and shamed in public. Yet the Father has renewed my life and now I am here to renew your life. Hear my truth. When you know the deepest weakness of your humanity, you may also know the life-giving power

of God's love and acceptance.' How will we cultivate safe spaces to disclose our vulnerabilities and be renewed to let the Spirit shine through us into the darkness?

The first Sunday after coming home from hospital, I attended our Colombo church. I was invited to greet the congregation, and found myself preaching an extempore sermon on the Psalm for the day. People started to weep for I was suddenly remembering the incident. I remembered my car stopping. I told the driver not to stop. But he did. There were people outside the car and they tried to open my side door, but they couldn't. So, they dragged me through the driver's side. They were using a small axe to chop me on my forehead. I tried to run, but they attacked me with an iron rod and attacked my leg, and I fell.

The Spirit of truth took me to a painful, terrifying and vulnerable place in my memory that I was unable to go to in my own strength. For the first time since being attacked, I began to connect God's Word to my context of being the victim of violence. The brutal images that emerged in memory found a place of both acceptance and mercy in the context of scripture. Truthfully proclaimed, God's Word transforms both preacher and congregation. Yet where do our conferences nurture preaching God's Word in the midst of the spiritual darkness of our idolatries?

In traditional Jewish belief, only God could forgive sins. Now John's testimony is that Christ conferred that power on his followers (John 20:23). When the violence and hatred of the world plunged my life into darkness, God's Spirit came to me through preaching a text I barely knew and in this act of preaching, all that had been broken within me began to be made new. Forgiveness puts things right with God, neighbor and self. So, it is also for our Diocese. We have received from the Holy Spirit the truth that calls us to the ministry of reconciliation in our woundedness and the woundedness of our war-weary nation. It is a joy to have received Singhalese pastors and people into our Diocese, to open new institutions ministering to Singhalese orphans, and to dedicate new churches for Singhalese-speaking congregations.

Conclusion

There is much more I could give thanks for, but my invitation is to direct you to the good news John proclaims about how Christ has come to reform us personally and corporately for prophetic witness to his truth and light. If I did not know the transformation Christ has worked in my life through my encounter with the darkness of our world's violence and hatred, how could I bear prophetic witness to you, to our Diocese, to our nation? I am convinced that we will only receive the grace to respond to God's faithfulness to us when we more intentionally confess our weakness and our failures before Christ, and wait on his transforming light to speak God's Word for our personal and corporate life. Then perhaps we may address in the conferences of the Asian church these critical questions I have highlighted in the text. I look forward to the sharing of your responses to these questions.

Questions for Discussion

1. Perhaps the decline of western churches is the result of their captivity to western culture's faith in science and growth to secure their status and prosperity?
2. How shall the church minister do justice in this violent and fearful world when only God's people have the courage and faith to listen to, and respond compassionately to the wounds inflicted by, those who hold onto power for their own security?
3. How will we cultivate safe spaces to disclose our vulnerabilities and be renewed to let the Spirit shine through us into the darkness?
4. Yet where do our conferences nurture preaching God's Word in the midst of the spiritual darkness of our idolatries?

John 18:28-30

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John 20:21-22

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

Hindrances to Finding the Truth

John 18:28-38 & 20:21-22

- Dr. Joyce J. Abugan*

Introduction

Towards the end of the fourth and the beginning of the third century B.C. there was a very famous architect, Sostratos. The king of Egypt used him in order to build the famous beacon light of Alexandria. The king's purpose in building this beacon light was that the ships might find their way into the safety of the port. When the building was completed, the architect Sostratos chiseled his own name on a stone that was part of the building. He did not want it to be readily visible and so he covered it with mud and whitewash. On top of that he wrote with golden letters the king's name so that when the waves hit the mud it would wash it away and his own name would appear.¹ Some people act in a clever manner so that what you see on the surface does not reflect the real. At times, they hinder others from discovering the real picture. We find this in John 18:28-38. The actions in this last section of John 18 revolve around several characters that interact with one

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¹ . (Author unknown.)

another as the scene unfolds and the story continues. From the characters and the actions which take place, we discover two hindrances that prevent people from finding the truth.

Hypocrisy and Religious Pride

John 18:28-32, 40

After Jesus was arrested, he was taken first to Annas (v. 12), the father-in-law of Caiaphas. Then the Jews took Jesus to Caiaphas, the high priest (v. 24). From there, the religious leaders brought Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor. They did this early in the morning (v. 28). The Jews did not enter the palace because Pilate, being a Roman leader, was a Gentile. The Jews wanted to maintain their religious purity. They did not desire to be ceremonially unclean by setting foot in a Gentile place. Why? As religious people who adhered strictly to Jewish laws, they wanted to eat the Passover (the most important religious celebration) and they could not do it if they became unclean because of their contact with the Gentile ruler. Thus, these Jews used a religious excuse for their action.

A story is told about a conversation between a parishioner and the minister as they met each other on the doorway of the sanctuary after the morning worship. The pastor politely greeted the man and said, "I am so glad you came today. Since I seldom see you around here, I am encouraging you to be actively involved in the church and join the army of the Lord." The man looked at the minister and replied with a smile, "Oh, I am already in the army of the Lord, Pastor." The minister answered, "Oh, I didn't realize that. But how come I see you only during Christmas, Easter, and other special occasions?" "You see, Pastor, I belong to the secret service," answered the man.

Jesus was accused of being a criminal, a kind of a secret force. That is why the Jews took him to Pilate (v. 30) for trial. In reality, the Jews wanted to kill Jesus but they could not do that, so they had to enlist the help of the Roman government to give the execution verdict. When Pilate told these Jews to judge Jesus based on their law, the people objected and excused themselves. They knew the law well and told

Pilate, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.” (v. 31). They tried to hide their motive behind religiosity. Later on, the same people joined the crowd shouting, “Crucify him!” (John 19:6, 15).

Generally, Asian people are religious. For example, in the Philippines, many people go to church or places of worship everyday—lighting candles, offering prayers before certain saints, giving alms to the needy, denying themselves of the temporal comforts of life, to name a few. During the Lenten season, some pious adherents flog their bodies, carry a wooden cross, and allow themselves to be crucified. These religious practices lead others to the Christ of the Scriptures or hinder them from coming to the truth as proclaimed by Jesus. What do you think?

Have you encountered some church leaders who engage themselves in questionable behavior yet try to cover up their action by appearing to be godly? Is there an instance when a church leader attempts to close his eyes to corrupt practices in the community because the people involved are influential or wealthy?

Protection of Personal Interests

John 18:33-35

Pilate went back inside the palace and questioned Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (v.33). To his question, Jesus answered, “Is that your own idea or did others talk to you about me?” Jesus’ reply was, in effect, trying to probe Pilate’s personal stand. Did Pilate really agree with the Jews that Jesus is the King of Israel?

The Roman leader knew that the Jews were making false accusations against Jesus. Yet, Pilate had personal interests he needed to protect. As a Roman citizen, he faced the risk of losing his job and receiving the anger of the Jews if he would set Jesus free. In fact, he asked Jesus, “Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” (v. 35).

As the two engaged in conversation, Pilate found no fault in Jesus (v. 38). But he thought of the wishes of the people around him. So, Pilate used tradition as an excuse for condemning Jesus (vv. 38-39) in order

to protect himself. The customary release of a prisoner during the Passover time became the excuse Pilate used before the people. Naturally, the Jews demanded the release of Barabbas, the rebel. So, Pilate evaded the responsibility of giving judgment on the case the people brought against Jesus. Reading further into the next chapter (John 19), Pilate still found no basis for putting Jesus to death (John 19:4, 6, 12). Yet he allowed the wishes of the people to prevail. Indeed, he protected his personal interests. The Jews received what they wanted, the crucifixion of Jesus.

Pilate had an opportunity to declare Jesus not guilty of the accusation the Jews hurled against the Teacher. Yet, Pilate chose not to use his power to set Jesus free. The Roman governor was successful in protecting his position and its accompanying benefits as he served the Roman government.

Do you find something similar to what is happening in your community? Are there religious and political leaders who think only of themselves, their position of authority and power, rather than protecting the rights of the marginalized segments of society? What do they do to prevent girls from being sold as young brides to older men? What happens to farmers whose small pieces of land are taken by the landlords because these poor families cannot pay their debts? What about children who beg on the streets to feed themselves because of poverty? Whose responsibility is it to protect the orphans of war and victims of disaster or natural calamities? Who will defend the young women who are being lured into prostitution in their desire to have money so they can feed their siblings? What about dysfunctional families who are separated from one another because both parents are working in other countries in order to provide financial resources for the family?

Conclusion: Witnessing to the Truth

John 18:36-37

Jesus did not answer a direct ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (v.33). Instead, he told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest

by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place” (v. 36). Jesus declared that his kingship is not an earthly one, as was the common idea among the people of his day. Pilate, intrigued by such response, told Jesus, “You are a king, then!” (v.37). Obviously, Pilate did not understand the kind of kingdom Jesus was speaking of, in their conversation.

Jesus’ response must have increased the interest of Pilate. Jesus told him, “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (v. 37). In this strong statement, Jesus stresses the reason why he came into the world—to be a witness to the truth. His response showed how he used the encounter with Pilate as an opportunity to testify before the Roman governor the higher purpose for his coming into the world. Pilate must have been intrigued by the subtle response of Jesus.

Later on, Jesus commanded his followers to bear witness to the truth. He told the disciples, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (20:21). The same marching order holds true today. Jesus’ followers must bear witness to the truth. Jesus stresses, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). The primary task of the Christian disciple is to be a living witness to the truth, both in life and action without being a hindrance to it.

Questions

1. Have you encountered a situation in your job or school where you had to compromise your faith because you wanted to please your superior? How did you handle it? What were the results? How will you handle a similar situation in the future? Why?
2. What can you learn from Jesus’ example of using every opportunity to tell friends and foes alike about the purpose why he came down to earth?

3. Witnessing to the truth is not only limited to the spiritual aspects but also to the daily realities of life. What should a follower of the Lord do when one sees injustice in the church or community?

