

## A Lenten meditation by Thomas John in India

### Under the Shadow of the Cross

It is very important to take a step back from our highly competitive, fast-paced, over-consuming, rat race and take a second look at ourselves and ponder over the meaning of life and where we are headed. The Lenten season provides an occasion for that. The cross of Jesus Christ and his life, which led up to it provides a frame for a proper perspective on our life and its preoccupations.

First, during the Lenten season fasting and abstinence from foods provide us with an occasion to remind ourselves that life has a meaning beyond eating, drinking and satisfying our basic needs. While it is true that those basic needs are essential for life, we are reminded that "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). This is often referred to as the spiritual dimension of human beings. Human beings have a special calling to live in obedience to God and in responsibility to their fellow humanity and the world of nature to which they are inextricably bound. St. Augustine's prayer exemplifies this very aptly: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." We can smother this longing for an ultimate meaning and purpose in life by being busy with worldly matters and indulging in worldly pleasures, but it continues to burn in us as a smouldering fire and makes us restless.

Jesus reminds the crowd that followed him after the feeding of 5,000: "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (John 6: 27). "Food that spoils" alludes to *manna*, which God had given to the people of Israel in their journey through the desert (Exodus 16:13–21). They hoarded *manna* against the command of God. It bred worms and became foul; it was spoiled. "Food that endures for eternal life" is the food in God's dispensation that God provides equally to all and according to each one's need. There is no hoarding of food in God's dispensation. There will be caring and sharing and concern for equity. During Lent we are given an occasion to remind ourselves of the vanity of our consumptive lifestyle and what makes for a happy life.

Moreover, it reminds us of our responsibility to earth and nature. God created us in his image so that we may image God to the rest of creation; in other words, we are expected to act as God's representatives and stewards to the rest of creation. As Mahatma Gandhi said: "There is enough for everybody's need, but not enough for anybody's greed." The Lenten season gives us an occasion to reflect on and repent of our exploitative attitude and over-consumptive lifestyle and our failure to be good stewards of the resources of this earth. It is in this responsibility to the other—our fellow human beings and nature—that we become spiritual. The Russian thinker and theologian Nicolas Berdyaev has succinctly put it: "Bread for myself is a material concern, but bread for my neighbour is a spiritual concern." We have a responsibility to ensure that everybody else in the world has enough to satisfy their hunger. Our responsibility and concern should go beyond our self and our immediate relations to encompass all people in need and this beautiful earth, including the flora and fauna.

Fasting and abstaining from foods will not have any meaning unless we make a determined effort to reverse all exploitative, unjust, dominating and oppressive relationships. Isaiah 58:6–9 describes the fast that is acceptable to God in the following words:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
To loose the chains of injustice  
And untie the chords of the yoke,

To set the oppressed free  
And break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
And to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
When you see the naked, to clothe them,  
And not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?  
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
And your healing will quickly appear.

We find Jesus Christ as the one who has taken responsibility for his fellow human beings and the rest of creation and paid the cost for it with his life. On his cross we find love in action. On his cross we also find reflected the terrible consequences of our sin; what it had done to one who came to give us life and life abundant; how we have forfeited our great inheritance as God's own children. But on the cross we also find the outstretched arms that are always ready to embrace a "wretch like me." And with his resurrection we are given the hope and promise of a new life, a new creation, and a "new heaven and earth."

*Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Let us make this Lenten season an occasion for awakening the "spirit" within us and set it aflame so that from our life there will flow greater light and life to the world around. May we thus experience the power of his resurrection in our life and be agents of that power to a world subjected to decay under the power of sin.

### **Prayer**

*O God of our Lord, Jesus Christ, help us during this Lenten season to remember that we are mere dust and yet you have created us and shaped us in your image and breathed your life-giving breath into our nostrils that we should image God's love and care to the rest of Creation. We thank you for this election and calling of us to be your children and representatives. But we ask your forgiveness that we have often led our lives in forgetfulness of our election and calling and that your abundant life has been poured into earthen vessels. We pray for your grace to recommit ourselves to the path of the cross and thus, dead to sin, we may rise to eternal life with you.*

The 2011 Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study, p. 130

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