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REVIEW ARTICLE

Joy and Freedom of Being a Christian

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Prof Kurien Kunnumpuram, SJ, one of the creative Indian theologians, is quite convinced that freedom and joy are essential characteristics of our Christian existence. This article, meant to pay homage to the founder of Jnanadeepa, explores the basic content of his book, Freedom and Joy, which, I believe, characterizes his own life! Let us listen to him, as he writes in his last book, “Freedom and Joy”.

Jesus and Freedom

After a careful investigation of the Kingdom of God which was central to the life and ministry of Jesus the great Scripture scholar George Soares-Prabhu has come to the conclusion that Jesus was the supreme example of the freedom of the Kingdom of God. He has stated: “Jesus moves through the pages of the Gospel as the supremely free man. He is driven by no demons of greed or ambition – for the Son of Man “has nowhere to lay his head” (Lk 9:58) and has come “not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10:45). He is daunted neither by the pressures of heteronomous law (Jn 8:1-10) nor by the violence of established authority (Lk 13:31-33). With supreme freedom he challenges the most sacred institutions of his people when his concern for his fellowmen impels him to do so. He breaks the Sabbath (Mk 7:1-15), touches lepers (Mk 1:42), dines with the socially outcast and with sinners (Mk 2:15-17).”

Jesus’ mission to liberate people. He said that the Spirit of the Lord “has sent me to proclaim release to captives and recovery of

sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Lk 4:18). Jesus frees human beings from sin and guilt (Mk 2:1-12). He frees us from the routine of ritualism (Mt 6:7) and from the oppressive burden of the law (Mt 11:28-3 and 23:4). He liberates us from the terrible isolation to which we can be condemned by social ostracism (Lk 19:1-10), ritual uncleanness (Mk 1:40-45) or mental ill-health (Mk 5:1-21). He calls his followers to freedom from possessions (Mk 1:16-18; 10:1) from unhealthy family ties (Lk 9:61). He invites them to put all their trust in God so that they need no other security in life (Mt 6:25-34).

As a result of his personal encounter with Jesus Paul exclaims: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal 5:1).

Vatican II has dealt with freedom in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. It declares that “authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the image of God in a human being”. Then it adds: “For God has willed that man be left in the hand of his own counsel” so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to him”.

In 2013 Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation: The Joy of the Gospel, stated: “Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out that the precepts which Christ and the apostles gave to the people of God “are very few”. Citing Saint Augustine, he noted that the precepts subsequently enjoined by the Church should be insisted upon with moderation “so as not to burden the lives of the faithful: and make our religion a form of servitude, whereas “God’s mercy has willed that we should be free”. This warning, issued many centuries ago, is most timely today. Here Kunnumpuram recalls the powerful words of St Paul: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters” (Gal 5:13). The implication of these words is this: Freedom is God’s gift to us. Every gift of God involves a task on our part. Hence it is our lifelong task to become increasingly more free. But as a famous hymn has it: “It is a long road to freedom”

Joy of Being a Christian

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem an angel of the Lord told the shepherds: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all

the people” (Lk 2: 10). In the gospel of Mark Jesus begins his public ministry by proclaiming the good news that the Kingdom of God has come (Mk 1:14-15). Now joy is one of the fruits of the Kingdom (Rom 14:17). Towards the end of his ministry Jesus declared: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11). After a careful examination of the life and ministry of Jesus, Albert Nolan came to the conclusion: “Joy was in fact the most characteristic result of all Jesus’ activity amongst the poor and the oppressed. The meals he had with them were festive celebrations, parties. Jesus obviously had a way of ensuring that people enjoyed themselves at the gatherings. The Pharisees were scandalized by this. Rejoicing and celebrating with sinners was incomprehensibly scandalous (Lk 15:1). They could only assume that he had become a pleasure – seeker, ‘a drunkard and a glutton’ (Lk 7:34).”

Jesus tried to explain this joy and this celebration to the Pharisees by telling them three parables: The parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son (Lk 15). It is highly significant that each of these parables ends with joy and celebration. When the shepherd finds his lost sheep, he calls together his friends and neighbours and celebrates with them. And Jesus adds: “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk 15:6-7). Something similar happens when the woman finds her silver coin which was lost. (15:9-10).

The last parable is extremely significant. After listening to the parable one wonders: Who is the lost son? The younger son who went away from the Father and lived riotously with his women? Or the elder son, who, like a true Pharisee, kept the law most faithfully? The younger son was able to receive God’s forgiving love, rejoice in it and celebrate it. But the elder son was not able to do so. So, he is really the lost son! To quote Nolan once again: “There can be no doubt that Jesus was a remarkably cheerful person and that his joy like his faith and hope was infectious... The poor and the oppressed and anyone else who was not too hung up on ‘respectability’ found the company of Jesus a liberating experience of sheer joy”.

Pope Francis points out that the whole Bible speaks of joy. Jesus himself “rejoiced in the Spirit” (Lk 10:21). He promises his