

St. Paul's Spirituality of the Cross

**Rev. Fr. Cruz. M. Hieronymus, GGAMCCC, Vellamadam,
Kanyakumari District – 629 305.**

The Cross of Christ in the Life of Paul

St. Paul's way of life was a way of the cross. The cross of Christ was the focal point of Paul's ministry and life. What was once a 'stumbling block' and 'foolishness' (1 Cor 1:23) became "power and wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24). His main work was "proclamation of the crucified" (1 Cor 1:23). He "decided to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). This he did in order to save humankind. He "made us alive and forgave all our trespasses erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside nailing it to the cross" (Col 2:13-14). Through the cross "he has made both the groups (Jews and Gentiles) into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Eph 2:14). Of course, when Paul speaks of the cross, it is never cut off from the resurrection; it is always Jesus who died and raised that Paul preached. Here we emphasize the aspect of the cross.

The cross of Jesus made an indelible mark on the life of Paul. His whole life was a living proclamation of the power of the cross. He underwent enormous sufferings on account of the gospel of the cross of Christ. But he was happy at that. He was content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ ... (2 Cor 12:10). He felt that he too was crucified with Christ. "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me ... (Gal 2:19-20). He rejoiced in his sufferings and viewed them as, "completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body that is the church." (Col 1:24) He consciously and

joyfully lived the cross of Christ so that he could say, "may I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal 6:14).

The Gospel of Paul as the Cause of the Cross

Paul would never have been subjected to so many crosses, had he not proclaimed the gospel of Christ with such a conviction and commitment. The gospel that he proclaimed was totally opposed to what the Jews and Judaizers would have liked to hear. The core of Paul's gospel was: Jesus Christ, who was crucified and killed, is raised; he is alive; I have met him. With his resurrection the Law has been superseded; now salvation is no more possible through the works of the law, but only through faith in Jesus Christ; so believe in him and follow him.

The Jews were very much angered by his proclamation. They could not stomach the fact that the man who was pioneering the opposition to the Christian movement has now become its champion. They opposed him, hated him and persecuted him. They followed him to every town he went and caused stir against him. But all this did not deter him in any way. Being convinced that the gospel of Christ is of great value to humankind, he was committed to take it to the ends of the earth. He was prepared for any sacrifice for the cause of the gospel. He regarded it as the pearl of great value which the merchant in search of fine pearls found (Mt 13: 45). He treasured it very much and wanted to share this treasure with the people of all the nations. Hence he travelled around the Mediterranean at least three times for preaching the gospel.

The Untiring Proclamation of the Gospel through Missionary Journeys

Paul was a great traveller. He travelled the length and breadth of the Roman empire several times for missionary purposes. Earlier in his life he travelled to several cities for the sake of persecuting the Christians. After his conversion, he journeyed to Damascus, to Arabia,

back to Damascus and to Jerusalem (Gal 1: 17-18). Sensing danger for his life in Jerusalem he went to Tarsus, his home town in Cilicia. There he spent some 10 years, about which period not much is known (Gal 1: 21).

Paul's main travels are called 'missionary journeys'. From 47 – 48 AD Barnabas, Paul and Mark undertook the **First Missionary Journey**. It took them to Cyprus and to the Pamphylian and Pisidian towns of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (all parts of today's Turkey). Acts 13-14 give detailed account of this journey.

The **Second Missionary Journey** was undertaken probably after the Jerusalem council, in 50-52 AD. This was a much longer journey. The missionary party was divided into two groups. Barnabas and Mark went back to Cyprus and Paul along with Silas went via Tarsus to the cities of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch which he had evangelized in his first journey. Adding on the way Timothy and Luke to the company, Paul visited the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia (Modern Greece), covering the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, Boerea, Athens and Corinth.

The **Third Missionary Journey** lasted for more than 5 years (52-57). Ephesus became the centre of this missionary journey. Paul visited most of the towns which he had evangelized in the earlier journeys and confirmed the Christians in their faith. He also evangelized the province of Asia (Ephesus, Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea – all in today's Turkey) and that of Illyricum (in today's Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina).

We can never admire Paul sufficiently for his great journeys. Long distances were covered in each journey. To give an example we can take the second missionary journey. Paul travelled 3557 k.m. in this journey alone.

| From | To | Distance (in Km) | Days | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|------|-----|
| | | | Min | Max |
| Antioch | Derbe | 471 | 12 | 21 |
| Derbe | Iconium | 144 | 3 | 4 |
| Iconium thr' Neapolis | Antioch | 142 | 3 | 4 |
| Antioch, touching Bythinia | Anchrya | 312 | 8 | 14 |
| Anchrya | Troas | 771 | 20 | 42 |
| Troas (sea) | Philippi | 250 | 3 | 3 |
| Philippi | Thessalonica | 140 | 3 | 4 |
| Thessalonica | Boerea | 70 | 2 | 2 |
| Boerea | Athens (Land-56, Sea-450) | 506 | 10 | 14 |
| Athens | Corinth (Land-16, Sea-75) | 91 | 3 | 3 |

Thr' Land 2122

Thr' See 775

Jerusalem to Antioch 660

Total distance 3557

(Taken from R. Jewett, *Dating Paul's Life*, London, 1979 59-61).

Thus in the 2nd missionary journey alone Paul covered 3557 k.m. (excluding the enormous distance from Corinth to Caesarea which he traveled by ship and the short distance from Caesarea to Jerusalem). This is more the distance from Kanyakumari to Kashmir!

The Crosses Borne During the Missionary Journeys

Travel in Paul's days was not as easy and as comfortable as today. There were no fast vehicles as today. Often the distances had to be covered on foot. There were no inns and hence often one would be exposed to hunger. There were no bridges (except very few) over

rivers and hence the danger of being washed away while crossing rivers. There were wild animals and robbers all over.

Sea journey was no less dangerous. Ships were at the mercy of the wind. Shipwrecks were very frequent. Paul himself speaks of the difficulties he encountered in his travels, such as shipwrecks, crossing rivers, danger from robbers, danger from various peoples, danger in the wilderness, cold, hunger, thirst etc. (2 Cor 11:25-27).

Hard Work Day and Night as an Important Component of Paul's Spirituality

Paul says several times that he worked with his own hands. "We worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God" (1 Thes 2:9). "We were not idle when we were with you. We did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it but with toil and labour we worked night and day" (9 Thes 3:7-8). "We grow weary from the work of our own hands" (1Cor 4:11). According to Acts 18:3, Paul stayed in Corinth with Aquila and Priscilla and "they worked together - by trade they were tent makers". 2 Cor 11:27 also speaks of "toil and hard work" during Paul's journeys.

It must have been nearly impossible for Paul to find time and strength to work amidst all these travels, distances, difficulties etc, etc,. Yet he made it a point to work with his own hands to make his livelihood so that his gospel would be credible. Nobody would be able to accuse Paul that he took up mission for his maintenance. Paul is giving the good news of Jesus free of cost. It is entirely gratuitous. It comes out of his conviction. That is why his gospel was received by so many people wherever he preached. (In fact, itinerant preachers of his day were accused of making an easy livelihood through their preaching. Moreover since Paul was earnest about the collection of money for the poor in Jerusalem, his adversaries had accused him of greed and swindling of money. Hence he had to show that he did not need money from anybody for his living). If only the ministers of God's

word followed the wonderful example of Paul, their message would be much more credible!

Renunciation of Rights to Further the Cause of the Gospel

The heroic commitment to the cause of the gospel made Paul forego many conveniences, comforts, pleasures etc. He did not care for his family status, great secular and religious education, high social standing, Roman citizenship or anything else which he might have earlier valued so much. He has come to regard everything as a loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus. For his sake he has suffered the loss of all things and regarded them as rubbish (Gal 3: 7-8).

Because of the commitment to the gospel, Paul had to renounce his rights too! As we have seen earlier he had renounced his right to remuneration for his work though he knew fully well that “the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Cor 9:14). But in Paul’s own words, “We have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ (1 Cor 9:12).

One of the main renunciations was the **foregoing of the right to have a life – partner**. Paul remained single, a celibate for the sake of the gospel (Some scholars hold the view that Paul should have been married when he was about eighteen years of age, according to the Jewish practice [Pirque Abot 5:24] though later, after his embracing of Christian faith his wife would have deserted him [Phil 3:8]. But in any case he was single during the time of the proclamation of the gospel).

Paul, following the example of John the Baptist and Jesus himself chose to renounce the gift of marriage. He chose to remain single for the sake of service to the Lord wholeheartedly. The world does not understand this easily, because what is normal here is marrying and giving in marriage, But celibacy goes more with the new order to come where there is no marrying or giving in marriage (Lk 20:35).

Such are those "who have made themselves eunachs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 19:12). Thus Paul (John the Baptist and Jesus as well) by embracing celibacy, which belongs to the new order, is a sign of that new order that is the Kingdom of God.

Accusations Hurlled against Paul

Suffering for the sake of the gospel was Paul's lot. Suffering came in the form of accusations all through his life. Paul was accused of **physical weakness**: "His letters are weighty and strong but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible" (2 Cor 10:10). He was accused of "**being humble when face to face but bold when away**" (2 Cor 10:1). He was looked down upon as an unfitted person (2 Cor 4:7-10; 12:7-10; 13:9; 10:10). He was found fault with for **acting like a fool** (2Cor 5:13; 11:16-19; 12:6, 11 etc.).

He was thought of as **not preaching well**. People could not understand what he preached (2 Cor 4:3). He was accused of "**being rude in speech and lacking rhetoric still**". He himself says that he was untrained in speech (2Cor 11:6). They said that he was vacillating because there was a change in his plan (2Cor 1:17, 23). They even accused him that he was **preaching circumcision** obviously to confuse people and to show him as a man of double talk (Gal 5:11).

At the same time Paul was accused of **priding and boasting** (2 Cor 3:1,12 ; 5:12). He was found fault with **preaching himself** (2 Cor 4:5). He was also accused of **commending himself** (2 Cor 5:12-13). He was accused of **flattery** (1 Thes 2:5). He was found fault with seeking **human approval** and trying to **please people** (Gal 1:10-11).

The enemies of Paul resorted to a character assassination. They accused him of **not being frank, open and sincere** (2 Cor 1: 12-14). They thought that he was **dishonest** (2 Cor 12:16-19). They accused him of **deceit** (2 Cor 4:8; 12:16). They accused him of **cunningness** (2 Cor 4:2) and **trickery** (1 Thes 2:3). They also accused him of **impure motives** (1 Thes 2:3) and **greed** (1 Thes 2:5).

One of the main accusations, especially from the Corinthians, was that Paul was **not receiving money** from them, when all other preachers gladly received. But at the same time Paul received money from the Philippians. Hence he was accused of **partiality and discrimination** (1 Cor 9:1-18; 2 Cor 11:7-10; 12:13). The Corinthians also accused him of taking **undue advantage** over them (2 Cor 12:17-18).

Enemies of Paul made scathing attacks on his Apostleship. He was seen as a kind **apostate and not a real Israelite** (Phil 3: 4-6). What he preached was **not the right gospel** (Gal 1:6-8). There was **no Christian message** in his preaching (2 Cor 12:2-9), because his gospel was **not from God** (Gal 1:12:17). According to them he had **no apostolic standing** (2 Cor 11:5; 12:12). He had no **letters and recommendation** from the Apostles (2 Cor 3: 1-3). Therefore according to them he was **not an apostle** (1 Cor 9:1).

The bitterest attacks are found in the second Letter to the Corinthians: attacks on the person, teaching and character:

1. attacks on his person: 10:1,10; 11: 6 (Paul's reply: 10:7; 13:4)
2. attacks on his teaching: 2:17; 10: 12-18; 11:7-12; 12:13; 11:4 (Paul's reply: 2:17; 4:2,5; 10:12-18; 11:1-4,22-30; 12:1-12)
3. attacks on his character: 1:15-17; 10:9,11; 11: 16-19; 12:16-19 (Paul's reply 1: 15-24; 3:1-6; 5:13; 7:2-4; 10:18; 15:16-19; 12:14-18)

Persecutions Endured by Paul

Paul's zeal for Judaism made him a persecutor against Christians in the early days of his life. Later, his zeal for Christianity made him the object of persecution all through his life. Sufferings for the gospel was his constant companion. Suffering deepened his theology and strengthened his determination. As Paul himself says, "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope" (Rom 5:3-4).

His life can be summarized in his following words: "We are afflicted in every way; but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed, **always carrying in the body the death of Jesus** (2 Cor 4:8-10). From the moment he got converted sufferings and persecutions accompanied him. After his conversion he went to Arabia and the king of Arabia, Aretus IV was after his life. He escaped to Damascus and the same king posted guards at the gates of the city and Paul had to escape in a basket through a window in the city wall (2 Cor 11: 32-33, Acts 9:25). He came to Jerusalem. The Christians would not believe that he was converted (Acts 9:26). Hellenist Christians even tried to kill him (Acts 9:29). Hence Paul had to be sent to his home town, Tarsus.

During his **first missionary journey**, in Antioch Jews stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and drove them away (Acts 13:50). In Iconium attempt was made to molest them and stone them (Acts 14: 5). In Lystra the enemies actually stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead (Acts 14: 19-20). 2 Tim 3:10-12 also speaks of the persecutions and sufferings of Paul in these cities.

During the **second missionary journey** in Philippi Paul was beaten with rods and thrown in prison (Acts 16:22-23). In Thessalonica Paul proclaimed the gospel in the face of great opposition (1 Thes 2: 2). There he was accused of setting the city in uproar and political charges were brought against Paul and he had to be sent away by night (Acts 17:6-10). In Berea, the Jews stirred up and incited the crowd against Paul (Acts 17:13).

In **third missionary journey** Paul had to undergo more hardships and suffer many more persecutions for the sake of the gospel. In 1 Cor 15: 32, Paul says that he had to fight with beasts at Ephesus. It is not clear whether he actually fought with dangerous beasts in the arena or speaks here metaphorically of his struggles with wicked men. A second century work, Acts of Paul, says that Paul fought with a lion.

Paul speaks of a constant 'thorn in his flesh'. In his own words, "... a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated (2 Cor 12:17). Scholarly opinions are divided as to the nature of this 'thorn in the flesh'. Was it a disease that was very painful to Paul? Was it a defect in him, specially a defect of speech? (We see the enemies of Paul ridiculing him about his ineffective speaking and preaching). In any case it was a bitter and painful experience for Paul. Paul "three times appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave" him. But the Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12: 8-9).

In 2 Cor 1: 8-10, Paul says that because of "the afflictions we experienced in Asia, we were utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. We felt that we had received the sentence of death and God delivered us from so deadly a peril...." The classic text is that of 2 Cor 11:23-28: "Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman - I am a better one: with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I have been beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea; danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, beside other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches." Cfr also 1 Cor 16:9; Rom 16:3; Acts 20:19; 21:27ff.

Paul gladly accepted all these sufferings for the sake of the gospel. What the Lord had said through Ananias, namely, "I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Act 9:16) had fully come true! He knew that the gospel was a treasure worth any sacrifice. He identified himself with Christ in his sufferings. He saw the marks of the wounds in his body as the marks of Jesus

(Gal 6:17). He believed that his life of suffering amounted to being crucified with him (Gal 2:19; 6:14). Paul knew that sufferings were necessary in his life for the effective proclamation of the good news as they were also necessary in Christ's life as part of God's plan (Lk 24:26). Hence he wished "to share in his sufferings, by becoming like him in his death" (Phil 3:10). Paul knew that the sufferings now cannot be compared to the glory to come (Rom 8: 17-18; 1 Cor 2:9). "..... For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ" (2Cor 1:5). The words of the letter to the Colossians (1:24) beautifully sum up the attitude of Paul towards sufferings for the sake of the gospel: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church".

Thus Paul travelled the length and breadth of the Roman empire, with great conviction and heroic commitment which have hardly any parallel in human history. He accepted gladly so many difficulties in travels and faced so many problems, accusations, oppositions and persecutions for reaching out the gospel to the world of his day. He spent every bit of his energy towards the proclamation of the gospel of Christ with whom he was in full communion. As he himself says, "for me, living is Christ and dying is a gain" (Phil 1:21); "Even if I am poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and I rejoice with you all ..." (Phil 2:17). Here we have a glimpse of Paul's spirituality of the cross.