

JESUS CHRIST: THE LIBERATOR (Dialogue with the youth– Number 3)

This year, in my Pontifical Christmas Message to our people I focused on the theme of liberation. I would like, in the context of this fourth dialogue, to share some of my reflections with our youth.

The concept of liberation is at the heart of the Holy Bible. The Old Testament is the history of the expectation of the Messiah, and the New Testament the history of the coming of the Messiah. However, the people of the Old Testament believe that Messiah would come to liberate them from slavery, and restore their political kingdom in Jerusalem; while in the New Testament the Son of God comes to liberate the entire humanity from the slavery of sin and establish God's kingdom in the world.

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem is, therefore, the enfolding of God's gift of liberation. Jesus perceives His earthly mission essentially as one of liberation. Hence, it is not by accident that Christ embarks on His mission by reading that chapter from the prophet Isaiah where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4: 18-19). It is significant that after reading this passage Jesus affirms that "Today this scripture is fulfilled" (Luke 4: 21).

We must look at the Christ-event from this perspective, and grasp the very meaning and implications of Christ's miracles, parables and teachings in light of God's engagement to liberate humanity. Salvation, which is the core of the New Testament, means liberation. Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise because of their sin. The purpose of Christ's mission was to liberate human beings by restoring to them God's fallen image and making them the adopted children of God. Christ would achieve the liberation of human beings by His cross.

As we turn once again to Bethlehem, let us greet in the incarnate Son of God our true liberator; a liberator who has made history; a liberator who is always ready to liberate each of us from our own slavery today. Christ is Emmanuel, which means God-with-us.

– Christ is with us to liberate each of us from our own *self*. Our self can be our greatest enemy, for, by concentrating on our own self, we enslave ourselves. Because God is both the cause of our existence and the purpose of our life, we have no right to live our lives according to our own desires and designs. A self-centered life rejects God. By living a God-centered life, we will live life properly. As a person, as part of a family, and as a member of a community, we must live our life with a sense of responsibility and accountability.

– Christ is with us to liberate each of us from the slavery of *law*. As an instrument of organizing and governing society, law can liberate. However, it can also enslave. Law

which enslaves is a source of evil. Referring to the codified religious laws of the old dispensation, the Apostle says: "We have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Romans 7:6). With His blood, Christ saved us from the captivity of the old law. Law which liberates is sustained by moral and human values and promotes justice, peace and freedom. For Christianity, freedom is an essential ingredient of law; it is a God given gift to humanity. But we are called to use the freedom responsibly.

– Christ is with us to liberate each of us from the slavery of the *material wealth*. Spiritual and moral values constitute God's image in human beings. Present societies, however, are dominated by material values and are governed by materialistic purposes and interests. As Christians, we must not allow material values to be at the center of our life, impacting on our way of life and our decisions. Spiritual and moral values promote the basic principles that are at the heart of our human existence and that help us to lead a purpose-driven life.

– Christ is with us to liberate each of us from the slavery of *evil*. Evil surrounds us and seizes any opportunity to approach us. When Christ was approached by evil, His response was firm: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only' " (Matthew 4: 10). Wearing different faces and using different names, evil constantly approaches us. Liberated by Christ, we have the courage to reject evil, which may be attractive in appearance but destructive in essence. To strengthen ourselves, we must worship only Christ, our liberator.

– Christ is with us to liberate each of us from the slavery of *death*. According to the Bible, death is not only the cessation of physical existence; it is also the absence of God and the dominion of sin. God so loved the world and humanity that He sent His only begotten Son to liberate us from the bondage of sin, as states the Evangelist (John 3: 16). The Christ-event is God's offer of "abundant" life to humanity. We are invaded in our daily life with the kinds of trends and tendencies, with the sort of ways of life and patterns of thought that make us the captives of fear and insecurity. Christ conquered the death by His cross and gave us new life.

We are living in a world full of uncertainties and anxieties. Let us remind ourselves that the Child of Bethlehem is with us, as we carry on our combat of faith and hope. Let us not forget the words of Saint Paul : "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4: 9), because Christ is and will remain our Liberator.

Yours prayerfully,

**ARAM I
CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA**

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