

Where is Our God?

‘Are you not seeing thousands of people dying every day?’.

“Have you reached Nairobi safely?”, was the first call I received from Dr. Manoj Kurien, a friend of mine in WCC when I landed in Nairobi.

“Yes”, I replied. “Thank God”, he responded. He continued, “kindly inform your wife and relatives that you have landed safely in Nairobi and you are taking rest in the Hotel”. I could feel the anxiety in his conversation. I asked him, “You seem to be too much worried?”.

He responded in a desperate mood. “Sir, Ethiopian airlines just now crashed near Adis Ababa airport. Rev. Norman Tendis, a consultant of WCC and more than a hundred UN officials, expected to attend the UNEP, fourth environment assembly, were there on the flight. You were also supposed to travel on that flight.”

It was then that I realised the gravity of the situation and immediately rang up to my wife and relatives. I thanked God for the miraculous escape in missing the plane on which I was to travel. As I was alone in my room, my thoughts flashed back to a miraculous escape from an accident that took place forty years ago. This was my second miraculous escape.

My father was a clergy, and he wanted me to become a clergy too. After joining as a lecturer in Bishop Moore College, Mavelikara, he again expressed his desire. He told me to be in His ministry as an ordained lecturer. I agreed to that and joined Kerala United Theological Seminary (KUTS), Trivandrum as an external student for BD. Every Saturday, I used to travel from Mavelikara to Trivandrum to attend Classes at the Seminary. I wrote the examination for the papers in Church History and Indian Theology, and I secured more than 75 per cent marks for both the papers. After one of the Saturday classes at KUTS, I was returning by train. As the train had no stop at Mavelikara, I had planned to get down at the next station and return to Mavelikara by bus. As the train was more than two hours late, the driver of the train was helping the passengers to get down at the non-stopping stations by slowing down the train. When it reached Mavelikara railway station, three passengers, from my compartment, got down from the train when it slowed down. I also got down, but unfortunately, I stumbled and fell on the sandbed at the end of the platform. As I fell face down on the ground, I became unconscious and remained on the platform for more than half an hour. As there were no lights at the place where I was lying, nobody noticed me. It was only half an hour later that some workers saw me and brought it to the notice of the station master. The workers got only a lorry to transport me to the District Hospital.

From the small diary in my pocket, the Doctor who attended me understood that I was a lecturer in a nearby College. The Doctor presumed that I had fallen from a train and

assuming the possibility of a head injury, he gave an injection for sedation. Rev.Prof.K.C.Mathew, Principal of Bishop Moore College and other colleagues, rushed to the hospital and decided to transfer me to Kottayam Medical College, 70 Kilometres away from Mavelikara. Around midnight, I was admitted at Kottayam Medical College. I got excellent medical attention. Anticipating head injury, they gave me sedation again. I understood later that my father placed his hand on my forehead and prayed to God.

"This is my eldest son. You should not take his life. I am your servant". He remained in prayer for hours. The doctors and the public felt that there was no chance of recovery as it was a fall from the train. The next day the Principal announced in the College that I was struggling for life and requested all the students to stand up for two minutes for prayer. After three days, I gained consciousness. There was a warning that even if I returned to healthy life, there would be a risk of my hand or leg being paralysed. But nothing happened. After seven days of casual leave, I joined the college. Some people humorously remarked, 'the deadman is walking'. This was a piece of big news. After that, I served the college for thirty-three years, and the last two years, as the Principal.

While I was studying at CMS College, Kottayam I was in close contact with Bishop Poulose Mar Poulose, Bishop of Chaldean Church, Trichur. During that time, I had a lot of questions and doubts while reading the Bible. The answers I got from Sunday School teachers and other religious scholars were not logical for me. While Bishop Poulose Mar Poulose addressed the students of CMS College, Bishop challenged all the students and my confusion increased. I wrote a letter to the Bishop with specific questions, without anticipating any reply. After one week, I got a response from him. As the answers were logical and reasonable, I became happy. Whenever I had any doubts, I used to write to him, and I got replies. We became close friends. He came and stayed in our parsonages in three different places. He delivered sermons in Churches where my father served as a vicar. The Bishop heard about my accident only after a week. He came to Kottayam, where my father was serving as a pastor, to see me. He couldn't meet me as I had joined duty after the accident.

The Bishop asked the details of my accident, and my father told him, "Bishop, I cried to God, placing my hand on his forehead throughout the night. God heard my prayers and has given back my eldest son". Bishop said, "He fell from a train, and he had no head injury. As God used his good friends and Doctors, he got good medical treatment. Hence his life has been saved". My father became upset on hearing his response. He might have expected the typical response, "Halleluiah, praise the Lord, our God is great".

The Bishop wrote a letter to me regarding his visit to my house and expressed his concern about my health. He also mentioned, "God worked through your good friends, and doctors to save your life. You have now got a chance to live some more years in this world, discern God's will and work with God for his Kingdom". When I met him later, I told him about my father's sudden shock in hearing his response. He is not ready to accept the instant miracles as mentioned by some speakers. He believed that God is

doing wonders through doctors and nurses. As I was following his talks, I could understand his theological stand on various issues. He challenged many traditional understandings in his talks. I have published his speeches in my magazines and books. He died on 24th March 1998 after heart surgery. This is the first story of my accident.

I was invited to address the fourth UN Environmental Assembly, the session on faith for Earth held at Nairobi. WCC was planning to book my ticket along with Rev. Norman Tendis of Austria from Adis Ababa to Nairobi in Ethiopian Airlines. They put this suggestion to me before booking the ticket. I saw the email from them while I was in a programme in Chennai and I was busy with the schedules I forgot to reply to the email. They booked Rev. Norman Tendis's ticket. After a few weeks, I got a reminder asking whether I was attending the assembly or not. Then only I recalled the earlier email and requested the organisers to reserve my ticket. Then they booked my ticket from Kochi to Abu Dhabi and Nairobi. The flight which Rev. Norman Tendis travelled took off from Adis Abbaba and crashed immediately. All the passengers aboard died within seconds. I have always been very systematic in executing the assignments and in replying to all the emails. I don't know who prevented me in responding to this email. Had I replied to that mail, I would have been a victim like Rev. Norman Tendis now. This news became viral. Some newspapers reported my miraculous escape also. I was getting a lot of WhatsApp messages thanking God for the miraculous escape.

Some of the WhatsApp messages were like this. "When hundreds of people died during the plane crash, God miraculously saved you. Thank God". I became agitated seeing such messages. **Hundreds of people died during the plane crash. Hundreds of Children became fatherless or motherless. The survival of many families became difficult. They lost the earning member in their family. When hundreds of families could not see a caring God, I was thinking of a caring God. What an irony?**

Next day I attended the Environmental Assembly. The meeting began with a moment of silence for paying tributes to the departed souls. Then Ms Athena Peralta, executive secretary of WCC, presented the Road Map which was prepared by Rev. Norman Tendis. She presented it with tearful eyes. Next was my turn. My presentation was on the ecological concerns of CSI. After the submission of the papers of various faith groups, the sessions of that day ended, and I returned to my Hotel.

When I checked my WhatsApp, I found a lot of messages from relatives and friends. Contents of the letters were like this. "God has a special concern for you. That is why God saved you from the plane crash. Thank God". The traditional way of presenting the saving act of God.

I was disturbed. When I escaped from my first accident, my relatives and friends sent the same messages. I accepted it with thanks. Now the situation is entirely different. Hundreds of people died; I only escaped. Why didn't God care for them? How can we explain God's Grace and concern for the hundreds of bereaved families? Thinking of all these things, I fell into a trance and saw Bishop Poulouse Mar Poulouse, my old friend

who died in 1998. But now he was talking to me. "Hi Kunju, What are you thinking. You people are visualising God as an insurance company or security officer. The traditional Christians are praying like this; "God, we are going, look after us, keep us from all accidents". For traditional Christians, the role of God is the role of a security officer. You are entrusting everything to God, considering Him as a security officer for you. You have to change your concept of God". Bishop looked at me. He laughed. "Kunju, I know what you are thinking. I didn't answer your questions. Yes, I didn't answer the question the way you expected. Suppose you have five children, you want to bring them up all into good positions so that they should live happily and comfortably. Unfortunately, one of them goes against your wills, what will you do? When he becomes a disturbance to others, you can advise him. **God created each person with an intrinsic value and have given the autonomy and freedom to select good and evil.** If he selects evil, is it right to blame the father."

"Before God, all his creations are equal. God's vision is a world where love, care, justice, humility is prevailing. The Holy Spirit is working for that. God is inviting all of us to join with God to work for a world hospitable for all. God loves all of us, including atheists. **God is not a magician to solve all your problems. When you select evil and create chaos, God will not work as a magician to solve the chaos created by you. God loves not only you.** He loved all those who died in that unfortunate plane crash. The carelessness of the engineer resulted in the plane crash. Kunju, again you got another opportunity to work for the kingdom of God. Discern your talents, be a part of God's call". Bishop left.

The trance continued. Now came another favourite Bishop of mine. Chrysostom Valiya Metropolitan who is now at the Fellowship hospital, Kumbanadu due to age-related problems. He came to Nairobi to help me in my faith problem. "Sir, I told you this incident earlier. **I went to visit a patient in a hospital at Thiruvalla. Her bone was broken in an accident. The lady became talkative when she met me. She said, "By the grace of God the accident took place in front of the hospital, hence I could be shifted here immediately". I said humorously, and this God could have avoided that accident also.** She laughed. I said seriously to make her understand some theological points. We have to obey God's laws and live carefully in our society. If not, it will result in the tragedy of not only to those who violate it but to others also. One person violated the traffic rules; which resulted in the fracture. We have wrongly understood God. For small kids, God is a grandpa with long grey hair sitting in heaven. During teenage, they know God with the church. For some, when they pray, they will do it in front of a Photo or an Image of God. When we grow more in faith, we can approach and worship God without Images or sacraments. People who are weak in the faith need sacraments, church and the images to worship God. We used to give milk to small kids. But when they grow up, we give them solid food. When they become adults, if they still demand milk, that means something is wrong with them. Our people are not growing in faith. Is it possible for me to say, how God has to function in this universe? If I can, then it is not a God. One Church worker told me earlier that Bishop Chrysostom has no faith in God. It is true. **My**

understanding of God is different from that of the Church worker". The image of metropolitan vanished.

Bishop Poulouse Mar Poulouse again appeared before me. "Kunju, all people in this universe are believers in one way or other. Like a staircase, people are on different steps in the matter of faith. Some are on the lower levels, and some are on higher levels. In our faith journey as a response to the contextual reality, we are climbing faith steps. Those who sent messages are remaining at the same level where they have started their faith journey. The faith journey is different for different people. Some are weak; some are stronger in their faith journey. Let us respect all of them.

I woke from my slumber and saw a beautiful write up on the wall

Where are you looking for God, God is within you.

God is using your hands to bless all the world.

Using your feet to do good.

Using your Eyes to look at the world with compassion.

God cannot do anything without you, and you cannot do anything without God.

I said, Amen.

During the COVID 19, I am asking the same question 'Where is our God?', 'Are you not seeing thousands of people dying every day?'

While I was reading the book, Planetwise written by Rev.Dr.Dave Bookless, it gave some excellent insights to me.

In the book of Hosea, the prophet looks around, seeing failing harvests and collapsing ecosystem. In his analysis of what has gone wrong, he doesn't blame God. Instead, he blames the behaviour of the people around him:

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel;
for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.

There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
and no knowledge of God in the land.

²Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.

³Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing. (Hosea 4:1-3)

Notice the link between cause and effect. It is because of the people's sin that the animals, birds and fish are dying. The creation will be harmed when we live

unsustainably. Hosea is not claiming that every ecological disaster is caused by the people in that immediate area. The poor farmers in developing countries are often the first to suffer from extreme weather or disease, but they may be mostly innocent victims of pollution or greed elsewhere... we cannot avoid the conclusion that poor stewardship and moral decay lead to environmental disaster. 'Do not be deceived, wrote Paul, 'God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows' (Galatians6:7). *Today we are reaping what our forebears and we have sown in terms of pollution, resource depletion and climate change.* The scale of the crisis is more extensive than anything we have ever faced before. Unless we recognise that this is a spiritual crisis, we will not be able to solve it.

While I was meditating on the text I read, relating with Corona, again I went into a trance.

I heard a divine voice from somewhere. *“Coronavirus is not my creation. Whatever things I have created, it has an intrinsic value and a purpose. Genetic modification is not in my dictionary. Those who created Corona should find the solution also”.*

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