



Kurien Kunnumpuram: **A Person of Freedom and Joy** *Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ*

1. The Person

Prof Kurien Kunnumpuram, SJ (1931-2018) is no more physically present with us. Allow me to describe briefly the person of Kunnumpuram. He completed his PhD on Vatican II from the University of in 1968, just three years after Vatican II. The next year he joined Papal Seminary Community, teaching at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeth and remained here till 2013. This means he has spent 44 years out of 87 years in Pune. On September 25, 2018 he was admitted in the hospital in coma state, due to a blood clot in the brain. Sadly after 29 days in coma, he breathed his last on October 23, 2018.

He is an eminent thinker and creative theologian. He started the journal Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies in 1998. He worked as editor of Asian journal for Religious Studies for more than ten years. He was the first editor of Encyclopedia of Christianity, published by Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth. Author of more than 20 books in areas of Church (Ecclesiology), Anthropology and Spirituality, he has contributed significantly to theologizing in the Indian context. On 17-18, October a seminar was organized in Kozhikode, to honour his contribution to Indian theologizing, where more than 40 participants studied 18 papers on themes dear to Kurien's heart.

One of the most creative and significant Indian theologians, Kurien's last book, aptly titled "Freedom and Joy" signifies his own life. As you know, Gandhi, dared to say, "my life is my message." Kurien would not really make that claim, but his life came very close to the message

of this book. He is quite convinced that freedom and joy are essential characteristics of our Christian existence.

He, along with Francis D'Sa SJ, George Soares-Prabhu SJ and Francis Pereira SJ, belonged to the second generation of theology professors at JDV, who brought about the emphasis on freedom and Indian orientation in the campus. [The first generation being Fr Lionel Mascarenhas, Fr Carlos D'Mello SJ and Fr Joe Miranda SJ]. Further, as you know, he followed the footsteps of great man like Scripture scholar Fr Francis Pereira SJ (1931-2014), liturgist Fr Lorenzo Fernando (1947-2017) and Indian philosopher Fr Noel Sheth SJ (1943-2017).

2. Freedom of the Children of God

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. Soares-Prabhu states: "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" (Mk1K 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 was 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 (Mk1:16-18; 10:1) and 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).

In 2013 Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation: The Joy of the Gospel affirms: “God’s mercy has willed that we should be free”. This warning, issued many centuries ago, is most timely today. So Kunnumpuram reminds us of the powerful words of St Paul: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters” (Gal 5:13).

3. 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).

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.

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 the South African Dominican theologian Albert Nolan: “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).

Conclusion: Empowering Presence

This experience of joy of the first Christians should inspire all of us to find great joy in our Christian life. Unfortunately, according to Pope Francis, “there are Christians whose lives seem like lent without Easter”. Some of them walk through life as though they are taking part in a perennial funeral procession. Kurien reminds us of Pope Francis who invites Christians everywhere “to a renewed encounter with Jesus Christ”. For “with Christ joy is constantly born anew.”

The freedom and joy Kurien experienced and radiated make him an enabling, encouraging and empowering presence among us. He could accept and affirm everyone with their differences and unique qualities. It is because of persons like him that at Papal Seminary, we can experience freedom, joy and fellowship. Inspired by him, may we all become free and loving persons: enabling, encouraging and empowering other, by accepting and affirming each one of us.

I was truly privileged to experience his presence for 22 years! Personally, he was truly my mentor, guide and guru.