

Editorial

**SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA
BIBLICAL MUSINGS**

Naiju Jose Kalambukattu CMI
Editor-in-Chief

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a versatile genius and a saintly person, integrated Biblical insights voluminously into his writings, teachings and spiritual discourses. His profound understanding of the Bible and its application to Christian life are well reflected in his works. They serve as a rich reservoir of biblical insights, for they beautifully blend Bible with practical guidance for spiritual growth, family life and social transformation. Therefore, as he swam against the current of his time, he could uphold the Gospel values of love, forgiveness and justice; and inspire countless believers to lead a life rooted and grounded in the Gospel values. Chavara read the signs of the times and interpreted them in the light of the Gospel to bring hope to the lives of thousands of people. He encouraged a deep personal relationship with Christ, highlighted the importance of Christian families as the foundation of faith, and he wrote extensively on the role of parents as spiritual guides and the need of daily family prayer.

Chavara's writings reflect and reveal his deep trust in God's providence, especially in the face of challenges. He exhorted, "Entrust yourself to the Divine Providence when you are faced with trials and tribulations, diseases and difficulties."¹ His letters and spiritual writings are full of exhortations for moral integrity and sanctification. "God's will always and everywhere," was the watchword of his spirituality. Chavara wished to be conformed to the will of God, for he was

¹ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Chavarul: Testament of a Loving Father*, revised and updated edition, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2018, Part 1:20.

convinced of the fact that “God’s will be done and will be performed.”² He realized that the discipleship demands denial of one’s self and will (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34). His letters register the same, “Our task is only to arrange for the work to be done. God will give us the money for it, because all this is God’s work our competence here is only to work.”³

Chavara’s motto, “The Lord is my portion” (Ps 16:5), was a profound declaration of faith, devotion and commitment to the Lord. As the Psalmist experienced, he trusted and believed in God as his ultimate treasure, surpassing all earthly possessions and desires. To phrase it differently, for Chavara, God’s love and promises outweighed all earthly possessions and desires. As his motto denoted, the Lord was his supreme good and he found his satisfaction and fulfilment in the Lord, and his detachment from all that is not God was key to his life. It also meant for him that God was the source of his happiness and blessing.

Chavara firmly believed that God was the source of his security, hope and inheritance; and his own words expressed the same: “Oh my God: You are my love, my joy, and all my fortune. If not in you, how could I live my life? You are my breath, my food and my drink. What a solace have I in you!”⁴ These musings of Chavara may have their basis on the Jesuan words: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5), and practised detachment from all that is not God. Kochumuttom comments: “Having God as one’s possession, naturally one does not need anything else; in and through Him one indeed has everything. Hence, all else other than God become quite insignificant, and one spontaneously becomes detached from them, which certainly is the real spirit of poverty.”⁵ Possessions constitute a formidable obstacle in a disciple’s bid for the crown of salvation. Jesus reiterated: “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Lk 14:33). Jesus implies that to be his disciple is to relativise every other

² CWC, Vol. III, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, Mannanam: St Joseph’s Press, 1990, 1.

³ CWC, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/5, 81; Lucas Vithuvattickal, “A Life Full of Virtues,” in P. Kalluveetil and P. Kochappilly, ed., *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 103.

⁴ CWC, Vol. II, *Atmanuthapam* (Malayalam), trans. Mary Leo, *Compunction of the Soul*, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1989, 2:141-146.

⁵ Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2017, 111.

thing in life: family or wealth, prosperity or health or fame. He means that Kingdom of God must come first in the list of goals and priorities in a disciple's life.

Giving up the family inheritance and possessions, Chavara wished to be a genuine follower of the Lord and practiced the instruction: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all your possession, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me" (Mt 19:21). Chavara exemplifies himself to illustrate the seriousness and urgency of the teachings of the Lord and shows us how absolute and radical are the demands of discipleship.

Chavara's actions supported prayer and his prayer supported action. In the words of Pope Francis, the blending of both prayer and work is the ability to cultivate an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity (EG 262).⁶ Chavara could blend the contemplative life of Mary, who sat at the feet of the Lord (Lk 10:40) and the active service of Martha well in his life. As Pope John Paul II teaches, "The missionary must be a contemplative in action. He finds answers to problems in the light of God's word and in personal and community prayer" (RM 91),⁷ Chavara urges every Christian disciple to take up the challenging task of combining prayer with activities and activities with prayer, one leading to and enriching the other. Pope Francis reiterates, "Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out" (EG 262). Chavara, even in adverse and difficult moments of life, never lost the energy or fervour because he recognized the significance of deeper union with the Lord in prayer and adoration, and hence, he amalgamated both prayer and work. Though Chavara, during his era, felt the urgent need of throwing himself into the *work of the Lord*, he always gave priority to enter into communion with the *Lord of the work* in prayer. Through the life-example, he taught his followers that a true disciple needs to be both Martha and Mary, and

⁶https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html; accessed on 16.01.2025.

⁷https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html; accessed on 16.01.2025.

he challenged their priorities so that the fellowship with the Lord was ensured by being with the Lord and hearing his Word before the work for the Lord was done. His readiness to cater for the spiritual needs of the people entrusted to his care even in the life-threatening situations⁸ reveals not only his spirituality of contemplation and action but also his close imitation of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11).

Chavara urged the people to imitate Christ's teaching to "Love one another" (Jn 13:34) and exhorted them to be charitable and respectable and to forgive the shortcomings of fellow brethren. He admonished, "Forgive the mistakes and shortcomings of each other. If you do so, you will experience peace on earth and eternal reward in heaven."⁹ His love knew no limits and condition, for he did not nurse any grudge against anyone, and in case, someone insulted him he made it sure that they were treated with love and respect (Mt 5:39, 41-42). An example of his heroic practice of the virtue of love was, as mentioned above, the administration of the sacrament of anointing of the sick to a person suffering from small-pox, although many dissuaded him from doing so due to the fear of contagion.¹⁰ He advised: "Days on which you have not rendered any good to others will not be reckoned in the book of life. Be desirous of others' love and respect than they becoming fearful of you. Let no beggar leave your home empty handed; likewise, don't hesitate, as much as you can, to give alms."¹¹ Chavara longed to be conformed to Christ who emptied and humbled himself (Phil 2:6-7) and became poor for the sake of the humanity, and to imitate Christ he had taken humility as the fourth vow.

Chavara's life and works displayed the biblical invitation to imitate Christ (1 Cor 11:1) and to live a life of Gospel values, love, humility and service. His life reflected Christ's forgiving love, sacrifice and obedience and his various ministries and initiatives of charity namely, old age homes, orphanages, and schools, embody the Gospel message to love and serve one's neighbour (Mt 25:35-40). The founding of two

⁸ Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 7.

⁹ *Chavarul*, 1:1.

¹⁰ Mareena & Benny Thettayil, "Theological Virtues in the Life of Chavara," in Benny Thettayil & Naiju Jose Kalambukattu, ed., *Father and Doctor of the Church: A Theological Reading of the Life and Writings of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications & Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2024, 285.

¹¹ *Chavarul*, 1:14.

indigenous congregations for men and women as *Besrauma*, a house built on a hilltop for all to see, a *spiritual resort* or a *mirror of virtues* was a creative and positive response to the biblical ideal of Christian perfection (Mt 5:45; 1 Pet 1:16). He encouraged the faithful to read and meditate the Word of God regularly, for he understood the transformative power of the Word in personal and communal life; he insisted on the family prayer where all the members participate actively that echoes the biblical ideal of unity in worship.

The present issue of the *Herald of the East* highlights the biblical vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. The volume has six articles and five of them are directly related to the theme. The authors, whose papers are presented in this issue, have differing perspectives. Nevertheless, each one shares the conviction that Chavara was imbued with the biblical vision, and his life, works and mission were deeply influenced by, rather embedded in the divine Word, as if it were his sole food and drink (Jn 4:34; 7:37-38).

Benny Thettayil explores the biblical ideal of *Bes-rauma*, an experience of 'a house on the hilltop', that the indigenous Carmelites of India lived and propagated. The first part of the article is an investigation into the ideal in the light of the various mountains appearing in the narratives in the Bible and their sacred significance, and the second part is a closer reading of the life and works of the early members of the Carmelites of Kerala. According to Thettayil, *Bes-rauma*, for them was a harmonious blend of both the contemplative and active aspects of religious life, following the example of Elijah on Mount Carmel bringing together social action and mystical experience.

Joy Philip Kakkanattu in his article on the biblical foundations of Kuriakose Elias Chavara's vision and mission explores the theme of God's Mercy in *Compunction of the Soul*, the poetic work of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. His literary works are soaked in Biblical concepts, metaphors, similes and other direct and indirect references. Kakkanattu makes a study of the theme of God's Mercy in relation to Chavara's vision of life, vocation and mission; and his Mariological understanding related to God's Mercy. Chavara is convinced that incarnation is the ultimate manifestation of God's Mercy.

Tomy Thomas Kattampally makes a study of the biblical vision of Chavara and focuses on the themes of divine sovereignty, human frailty, and God's providential care as presented in the first chapter of the

Compunction of the Soul. Chavara's gratitude for God's mercy culminates in his desire to offer himself completely to God. His life and writings invite the believers to recognize God's providence, respond in gratitude, and mould their lives in accordance with God's will. According to Kattampally, in the *Compunction of the Soul*, Chavara intertwines his personal experiences with biblical theology, highlighting God's mercy, human dignity, and the transformative power of faith, and further, invites the readers to deepen their relationship with God and embrace a life of holiness and gratitude.

Josin George Kaithakulam makes an exploration of Psalms as a powerful resource for spiritual growth. A soul who seeks and wants to live for God reveals the spirit of the Psalms, namely, praising God for who He is and what He has done and for His faithfulness and love forever while affirming the greatness of our God who is to be ever talked to, walked with in order to reach His house. Kaithakulam highlights the embeddedness of Chavara in the Psalms, and he proceeds with connecting the sum total of Chavara's spirituality with the purpose of Psalms.

Bincy Thomas Thumpanathu draws parallels between Chavara's prophetic dimension of leadership and the legacy of Old Testament prophets. Following their model, Chavara confronted the social and religious issues of his era through pioneering works in various fields. Thumpanathu demonstrates that Chavara's prophetic vision transcended social reform, aiming at a holistic transformation of the society. The author revisits Chavara's prophetic vision and mission, and invites the readers to reflect on the enduring relevance of his mission in promoting justice, uplifting the marginalized, and nurturing the communities in the Gospel values.

Jeff Shawn Jose Kaippettiyil and Paul Kunnampally Pallathucherry examine the life of Kuriakose Elias Chavara through the lens of Charles Taylor's dweller-seeker framework. In the context of the declining influence of traditional religion in the West, they explore Charles Taylor's conceptualisation of the contemporary spiritual landscape using the framework of "dwellers" (those deeply committed to their established faith) and "seekers" (those actively searching for truth). Kaippettiyil and Kunnampally then apply Taylor's framework to the life and mission of Chavara, arguing that he exemplified both dwelling and seeking while grounding firmly in the Church. Finally, they highlight

the outcome of applying the dweller-seeker framework to Chavara's life and its relevance to the Church in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by dwellers and seekers in contemporary times.

These articles on various themes from the Bible that mirror the life and works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, who after the model of the great fathers of the Church whose subject of preaching, nutrition for their piety and soul of their theological undertaking was the Sacred Scripture, invite and challenge the readers to "be the doers of the Word, and not merely hearers" (Jam 1:22).