

Consumerism and Christianity

By Anand Peter

Today, let us reflect on an interesting theme: the Christian response to consumerism. Scripture makes no mention of consumerism as such, yet we are cautioned, since Jesus, in His teaching, spoke repeatedly of the dangers of becoming caught up in materialism. The Apostles did not miss the point either, and continued, once they began to evangelise after His ascension, to warn against the love of temporal possessions.

The answer to how Christians ought to respond to a world thoroughly permeated by every form of consumerism lies, I believe, in these early warnings of Jesus against materialism — and so it is worth pausing to consider what these two related terms actually mean. Materialism may be defined as the tendency to regard material possessions and physical comfort as more important than spiritual values; consumerism, as the social and economic order that encourages the acquisition of goods and services in ever-increasing amounts, often to the point of obsession. I would go so far as to say that if materialism is a sin, consumerism is the encouragement to sin — just as, in the very first sin, it was not disobedience alone but Satan's own deception and encouragement that led Adam and Eve astray. That, indeed, was our lesson from the Old Testament today. Satan came to Eve and said, in effect: "Do not tell me God truly said you would die if you ate of that fruit. He does not want you to become like Him — go ahead and eat it, and you shall become as gods yourselves." Eve was carried away by the prospect of becoming like God, at the cost of an eternal death she perhaps did not yet understand. We are carried away, in exactly the same way, every day of our lives — by the newest models of car or telephone, by jewellery, by food, and even by drink. In short, materialism and consumerism are two sides of the same coin.

Since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, life has changed beyond recognition; the sheer proliferation of goods, and our ability simply to buy them, has reshaped the way we live. If we need something, we obtain it. If we desire something, we find it and purchase it. If something offers emotional satisfaction, we find a way to acquire it. Over the years, our dependence upon this consumer system has grown ever greater, as our way of life has shifted from a rural, farming existence to a largely urban and suburban one. Consumerism is woven into our way of life, and into our very way of thinking. Few of us, after all, grow our own food, raise our own animals, or milk our own cows; all of us must go to the local market to buy what we need. We must face the fact that, in many ways, we are dependent consumers — we need to consume simply in order to survive.

The other side of consumerism is that it promotes trade. Have you ever heard of the "velocity of money"? In simple terms, if you hold a single rupee and keep it to yourself, its velocity is nil, and it remains only a rupee. But once you spend that rupee, giving it to someone else, its velocity doubles, and it creates further value, and further trade. The faster, and the more often, money changes hands, the greater its velocity, and the greater the wealth and trade it generates. To calculate the velocity of money, one simply divides the Gross Domestic Product — the total value of everything sold within a country — by the money in circulation. Greater velocity fosters greater demand for goods and services, which in turn drives the creation and supply of those goods and services, and the economy grows, with new

avenues for employment opening up as a result. Do not imagine, then, that the Gospel has nothing to do with economics. Consider the Parable of the Talents that Jesus told, in Matthew 25:14-30, in which the master rebukes the servant who simply hid away the one talent entrusted to him, rather than putting it to use. That parable, I know, speaks chiefly of the spiritual gifts we receive from God and are called to put to use; but the same principle applies here. For us, as Christians, it becomes a fine balancing act: to decide what is truly our bare necessity, and not to covet, beyond that, possessions that carry no eternal value.

One of the particular dangers of consumerism touches our own inner life. We are not merely physically dependent on obtaining what we need by whatever means; we also find ourselves identifying with the brands we believe best express who we wish to be, and how we wish to be seen by others — what is sometimes called visible consumption. Have you ever considered how, as dependent and conditioned consumers, our very view of the world is reshaped, and how this, in turn, reshapes the way we think about Christianity itself — about our faith, our understanding of God, and our part in the local church? I think you might be surprised how deeply the pattern of our thinking about the world can affect both our thought life and our life of faith.

We begin, almost without noticing, to approach Christianity as consumers of Christ, rather than as a comprehensive way of life — a coherent set of beliefs and values to be lived out. Christianity then becomes merely one more brand among many, consumed alongside others, to express our own identity. To demote Jesus Christ from Lord to mere label is to strip Christian living of any expectation of obedience or good works, leaving only the perpetual consumption of Christian merchandise and experience in its place. Let me offer an example. Some years ago, during a tour of the Holy Land, I happened to visit Cana, and the first thing that struck me as odd was a large signboard outside a wine shop, reading "Original Cana Wine." The shop, I might add, was packed to capacity with visitors from every part of the world. The sign might simply have meant "made in Cana, not imported" — or it might, more deceptively, have implied a connection to the very wine of Jesus' first miracle.

There are, of course, places where Christianity has sought to make its own peace with consumerism, through what is called "prosperity" theology — a shallow and damaging falsehood, which has in turn spawned its own parody. Prosperity theology, a controversial belief among some Protestant Christians, holds that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for the believer, and that faith, positive speech, and giving to religious causes will increase one's material wealth; it treats the Bible, in effect, as a contract between God and man, by which faith secures security and prosperity in return. One can find examples, within parts of Christendom, where I genuinely believe Jesus would be overturning the tables, just as He did in the Temple. I believe firmly that such a reading of the Bible is a device for encouraging consumerism out of all proportion. The question we must ask ourselves is this: are we content in Christ? Do we live as though our identity, our worth, and our happiness are determined by our likeness to Christ — or by the wealth we happen to possess?

Good counsel to Christians comes to us clearly in Romans 12:2: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." We also read, in the Gospel, that when Jesus was asked which was

the greatest commandment, He replied, "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment" (Mark 12:30). We are commanded to love God with the whole of our being, and with every breath we draw; and one of the chief ways we do this is by following Christ's teaching, and by obeying His instruction.

Paul writes, in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10: "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." This is a most fitting passage for the subject before us. Whatever we possess, whether little or much, is entirely a matter of the grace of Jesus; we must, therefore, guard against the tendency to seek always more, or something newer, purely for the sake of change. This is what might be called maxing out what we already have. I myself drive a car now thirteen years old, and people often ask why I do not simply replace it. I continue to use it, in part because I received it as a gift from God, and in part because it remains in good working order — I intend to run it until it stops for good. We would do well to apply the same principle to everything we own. Shopping should never become a form of recreation, at the risk of falling into the trap of debt.

Generous giving frees us from the grip of idolatrous dreams, and from the love of money, and all it might otherwise do to us; it is, perhaps, God's own antidote to consumerism. In this, Christians are called to live out the gloriously free life that Christ has won for us, sharing what we have in complete trust in our Heavenly Father. We must accept that the Kingdom of God offers a wholly different vision of how the world ought to be. According to Luke, one of the most direct fruits of God's grace at work is that people begin to care for one another's material needs — food, water, clothing, shelter, and the like. To Luke, grace is never an abstract theological idea, but a living reality that moves people to act on one another's behalf; it creates a genuine human connection and community, grounded in real needs met by real people, in real and practical ways — quite unlike the enticing advertisements that draw us instead into a world of dreams.

We need also to understand that the sharp pain of wanting what we do not have cannot destroy us, because Christ has already crushed the idol of consumerism upon His Cross. Neither you nor your children will want, when your trust is placed in Him. To glorify our Lord Jesus Christ should be our whole aim; He delights to free us from the grip of idolatrous consumerism, so that we may show the world that He alone is enough for us. Let us tell ourselves this, a thousand times over, whenever we are tempted: Christ is enough for us. Amen.