

Stop Playing God; Reflect Jesus

By Anand Peter

The message contained in this title is, on the one hand, straightforward and easily grasped, and on the other, exceedingly difficult to practise. How true is the old saying that being born in a garage does not make one a motor car — and being born into a Christian home does not, of itself, make one a person of God. That thought takes us back to the very first sin. Satan subtly persuaded Eve that God had not spoken rightly when He warned that they would die if they ate of the forbidden fruit, going on to suggest, "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). This one desire, planted in mankind — the desire to be like God, without even understanding His true nature — brought about the first fall, so great a fall that mankind has not yet recovered from the ill effects of that disobedience.

Paul's words in Ephesians 5:1-7 speak to how we ought not to live in a worldly manner, and confirm this same line of thought. He wrote: "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour. But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them." This brings us, then, to the question of what the right way is to live our lives pleasingly in the sight of Jesus. While the Bible is full of guidance on how to live, and how not to, the Gospels and the Epistles give us particularly explicit teaching on the matter. I would urge you especially to read Matthew chapter five carefully, in which God the Son, Jesus Christ, tells us plainly how He wishes to see us live as people of God. It is all about our citizenship in the Kingdom of Jesus, of which He spoke so often. With this introduction as our backdrop, let us build our meditation upon the passage found in Matthew 5:13-16.

At the beginning of Matthew chapter five, we find multitudes gathering around Jesus, drawn by amazement at His miracles, or perhaps by simple curiosity, or even by the hope of a free meal. Those with a genuine interest in learning from Him came to hear His teaching, which He delivered from a hilltop, from the bow of a boat, while walking upon the water, and even while nailed to the Cross. It was here that Jesus first began to speak the words "Blessed are those..." — setting out, in what might almost be called the constitution of His Kingdom, the principles He lays before every one of us. But by verse eleven, speaking now of persecution, He begins to apply these teachings directly to the lives of His hearers. When He says, "Blessed are ye...", He moves from addressing the crowds to addressing His disciples, and from there, across the ages, into the hearts of every believer. Jesus lays down the everlasting principles of His Kingdom, written into the very fabric of creation, and then turns to address our own minds, breaking through the difficulties of our lives so that these principles might be lived out in practice. In other words, if you wish to know how to live your life as a person of God, you need only

turn to the Sermon on the Mount — described by one scholar as "the ordination address to the Twelve." Jesus begins with the Beatitudes — "beautiful attitudes," as they are sometimes affectionately called — and goes on to apply them to the lives of ordinary people, such as you and me.

Jesus sets before us two aspects of the mission He has entrusted to us: the first, a godly character; the second, the manifestation of good works — salt and light, respectively. I do not intend, today, to rehearse every use of salt. Let me simply make my point plainly. If the world is growing darker, it is not because of politics, or economics, or the education system, or the environment. It is because the Church of God is growing more worldly. The Church has lost her saltiness — and when that happens, we, the believers of our generation, lose ours along with her. A seasoning that has lost its flavour has lost its value; and if Christians make no effort to affect the world around them, they are of correspondingly little use to Jesus. If we become too much like the world, we become worthless to it. Christians ought to affect the world positively, drawing it toward the Kingdom of Jesus. Without pointing to any particular congregation, it grieves me to hear people speak of having no time for Christian mission, or for attending church, and so on. Many Christians go through the motions of faith much as a cook adds every ingredient to a dish except the salt — and the result, however carefully assembled, remains inedible.

To grasp the meaning of the salt metaphor Jesus used, we need some understanding of how salt would have been understood by His first-century hearers. Scholars have identified a considerable number of distinct functions salt served in the ancient world, for it was, in its day, a highly prized commodity — so much so that Roman soldiers were, on occasion, paid partly in salt, and a soldier who failed in his duties was said to be "not worth his salt." We may safely say, then, that the salt metaphor carries with it a general sense of value: disciples, in other words, are called to add value to the world around them. While the image admits of several interpretations, the likeliest use of salt intended here is as a seasoning agent. In this context, to be "salty" is to live out the eight Beatitudes set down in Matthew 5:3-12. If we live these out, we make Christ attractive to those who watch us. To be salty, then, is to be like Christ, and to live out His life; and as we do so, we help those around us acquire, in a sense, a taste for Jesus.

Can a town built upon a hilltop be hidden? Its lights may be seen from a great distance. In just the same way, if we live for Christ, we will shine like lights, showing others what Christ is like. Sadly, many Christians hide their light — by staying quiet when they ought to speak; by simply going along with the crowd; by denying the light altogether; by allowing sin and the pressures of modern life to dim it; by failing to explain that light to others; or by turning away from the needs of those in need. Be a beacon of the truth of the Gospel, and do not shut your light away from the world. Examine what it is that prevents you from shining as Christ wishes you to, and remove that hindrance from your path. Last month, I was teaching the senior students during our Vacation Bible School at my home church in Noida. As we discussed the hindrances that stand between us and the Kingdom of Jesus, I asked each of them, in turn, what prevented them from living a life that reflects Jesus. I received a number of predictable answers from most of them, but one boy alone was honest enough to admit that his mobile telephone was his greatest hindrance, though he wished to be free of his attachment to it. I told him to open the window and throw it out. He did not do so — and, sadly, from the very next day, he was absent for the rest of the course.

Have you ever allowed the Lord to look into your heart, and let Him tell you why He allows you to live today? In short, His purposes shape our own. How have you allowed our Lord to shape what you do today? Look only at the world around us — I believe it is crying out for help. It is suffocating. I find I can scarcely bear to watch, hear, or read the news the world presents to us. Faced with such economic, political, moral, and religious scandal, we may well feel there is nothing left to live for. The best that fallen man can do, in response, is to retreat into his own private humanism — but he cannot do so without harm to himself. He turns to one form of distraction after another, and yet finds himself no less lost. I do not know where you find yourself in this race that leads nowhere. What we must take from today's reflection is that Jesus does not merely offer an answer to some of the problems in our lives — He is the answer. He wishes to be our life, and our life's very purpose. Jesus wants to take all that He is, and place it within us; and He has, indeed, already given us what we need to live as He lived. The world is waiting for the Church to awaken and live according to her calling; she has nothing else left to wait for but judgement. Christians, live as Christ lived, and the world will fix its eyes upon you. Like Christ, you will need no advertisement, for the glory of God will already be shining within you.

If you genuinely desire a Christian life, do not remain impure salt, or a hidden light. Make every effort to set aside whatever hinders your walk with Christ, and recover your saltiness, and shine as the light of Christ, showing the right path to all who are around you. Amen.