

YOU MAY BE THE ONLY BIBLE OTHERS READ!

Today's Text: 2 Cor. 3:1-18

Extracts:

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? *You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.* And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God [2 Cor. 3: 1-5]

According to the 2011 national census, India has a population of 1.21 billion people of which close to 81% are Hindus. Christians form a mere 2.3%.¹ On 6 January 1929, a teenage Balkan, Irish-trained nun, Gonxha Agnes, arrived in Calcutta to teach at a girls' school in the Loreto Entally community.² In no time, her charity, unselfishness and courage; her organizational skills and capacity for hard work got noticed by the poor, the needy and the dying among whom she lived. Following the official recognition of her Missionaries for Charity by the Archdiocese of Calcutta, she began to send sisters to other parts of India. In appreciation of her work, she was honoured with the Padma Shri Award³ in 1962, the 4th highest in India for distinguished service. The Nobel Peace Prize followed in 1979. Gonxha Agnes is the well-known Mother Teresa of Calcutta. At her death on 5 September 1997, she left behind a global ministry operating in 123 countries.

The bulk of the people that Mother Teresa related to were not Christians and most of them might not have ever seen or read the Bible. They saw her as "the mother of the poor, a symbol of compassion to the world and a living witness to the thirsting love of God." Is that not what the Bible talks about? Is that not the good news that Jesus Christ preached while He was on earth? Indeed, Mother Teresa was the only Bible that others might have read. How about you? In this week's Bible verses, Paul reminds the believers in the Corinthian church and, indeed, all of us, "You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men." So, what do the people around you know about God and Jesus Christ when they "read" your conduct? This week's study will be challenging to our profession and practice of the Christian faith!

¹ <http://www.mapsofindia.com/india-demographics.html>

² Story based on "Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997)-Biography,"

http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20031019_madre-teresa_en.html

³ "Padma Shri," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Padma_Shri

1. Background: The believer among the Gentiles

Imagine the tension that filled the air when Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego were brought before Nebuchadnezzar for daring to defy the king's order to worship only the gold image and not to bow before any other gods [Dan. 3: 8-30]. The three young Jews had continued, and openly too, to worship the true God that they knew would be able to deliver them from the burning fiery furnace that the king had set as the punishment for offenders. For the sake of a "fair hearing," the king asked the "accused" if it was true what he had been told about them. As a form of trying to cow them to plead "not guilty," the king reminded them that no god would be able to deliver them out of his hands. But to the king's surprise, they did not only plead guilty to the charge, they boasted about the God they worshipped as follows: "He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."

Nebuchadnezzar was so furious that he got the heat of the furnace raised seven times. But when the three young men were thrown in, nothing happened to them! Instead, the king saw four men walking in the midst of the fire, unhurt. The king recognized the fourth person as one "like the Son of God." So, instead of a decree of death, the king issued a gospel message, saying, "I make a decree that any people, nation, or language which speaks anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap; because there is no other God who can deliver like this." Without opening the then known Bible, that is the Law of Moses, the Psalms and the Prophets [Lk 24: 44], the three young Jews became the Bible read by the powerful King of Babylon and his people.

On the day of His ascension to heaven, Jesus told His disciples that soon, they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, "and to the end of the earth" [Acts 1: 8]. Increasingly, however, we are running out of options. For example, in Muslim-dominated and other non-Christian societies, believers who attempt to evangelise face persecution or imprisonment. Even in the so-called advanced secular societies of Europe and America, sins, such as abortion and homosexuality have been made civil rights. In culture-dominated societies, notably Africa, respect for elders and family may becloud believers' willingness and ability to correct error or uphold gospel truth. *Everywhere, the hustle and bustle of modern living makes it increasingly more difficult for people to have enough time to access or even read the word of God in the Bible. So, how can we then make disciples of all nations? How can we teach them to observe all things that Jesus has commanded us [Matt. 28: 19-20]?*

In this week's Bible verses, *Paul provides us with one answer to those questions, namely, we can become the only Bible that others read.* Jesus has said that by our fruits, we shall be known [Matt. 7: 15-20]. Paul added in his epistle to

the Philippians, “The things which you *learned* and *received* and *heard* and *saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you*” [Phil. 4: 9].

So, what should be in a believer that others can read and interpret as the word of God? From Paul’s epistle under consideration, we should note the following points:

a) *You are known and read by all*

Paul writes, “You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all” [2 Cor. 3: 2]. In other words, *it was what others knew and read of those believers that could confirm to them if they were indeed from the disciples of Jesus, like Paul*. For example, when Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin on account of the cripple by the temple gate that had been made whole, they were not scared to confess their faith in Jesus. We are told, “When they [the Jewish leaders] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marvelled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus” [Acts 4: 13].

The moment people realize that you are a believer, they are going to watch everything you say or do. The standards by which they judge your conduct will be higher because that is what your faith professes. Did the God you profess not say that all liars will go to hell [Rev. 21: 8]? Why then are you lying? Did Jesus not teach you to be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect [Matt. 5: 48]? Why then do you seem to be wrinkled by sin? Each time you point one finger of “Repent!” at others, they will point back four at you, saying, “How about you?” So, what do you want others to read about you or know you for?

b) *You are an epistle of Christ written by the Spirit of the living God*

Paul writes, “Clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart” [2 Cor. 3: 3]. Without the Holy Spirit, our righteousness is as filthy rags. We do not even know what to do or say when we face trials except the Holy Spirit gives us utterance [Matt. 10: 20]. Instructively, when Peter and John were brought for trial before the Jewish council, they asked them by what power or name was the lame man healed. We are told, “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them ...” [Acts 4: 5-8]. Their boldness came from the Spirit of the living God.

When others hear you speak or see you do certain things, they can only see Christ in you if and only if you are Spirit-led. Jesus Himself once said, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words

that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” [Jn 6: 63]. *By the Holy Spirit, your work is empowered through His gifts, such as wisdom, knowledge and understanding, prophecy and healing, among others* [1 Cor. 12: 7-10]. *When others see love, joy, peace, longsuffering, goodness and self-control in you, among other demonstrations of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, they will know that you are walking in the Spirit* [Gal. 5: 22-23].

c) *Your sufficiency is from God*

Paul writes, “And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” [2 Cor. 3: 4-6].

Of ourselves, we can do nothing; but when we rest on God, we can do everything. In the words of Jesus, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me, you can do nothing” [Jn 15: 5]. *Unless we are anchored on God by Christ Jesus, we are merely dangling on a shoe-string of self-deceit in the stormy Satan-controlled world system!* But, like Paul, you should be able to do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens you [Phil. 4; 13].

From the foregoing, we can hear Paul saying loud and clear to believers: *what you do is more important than what you say about your faith*. It is better not to be a Christian at all than to be a bad one! A bad Christian is the one whose conduct gives Christ a bad name before Gentiles. So, who are you?

2. So, who are you?

There are less than two billion Christians in the world today out of a global population of about six billion people. Therefore, there is still so much work to do before Christ returns. The harvest is ripe but the labourers are few. It is time to pray the Lord of the harvest to bring more labourers into His vineyard [Matt. 9: 37-38]. Such workers are likely to come from among Christians, the potential bibles that non-believers could read. But are all those Christians believers? By water baptism, yes. By conduct? That is a different matter!

In a typical denomination or congregation, one can come across a variety of *tendencies* in professing and practising believers. In other words, we can behave one way today and be different down the road, depending on our ability to hold on to the truth of our calling. The following tendencies can be easily identified in our places of worship:

a) *Tendency to behave like undertakers!*

An undertaker is a person who buries the dead or makes coffins for burying them. Therefore, the more people die, the better for the undertaker because s(he) can sell more coffins. That is why when there is an epidemic, it is a business boom for the undertaker! ***Believers behave like an undertaker when they are not interested in other people's salvation but in their material well being. They are to be found among those who preach prosperity and blessings without equal or more emphasis on repentance or salvation.***

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned His listeners to beware of false prophets who come to them in sheep's clothing "but inwardly they are ravening wolves" [Matt. 7: 15]. Therefore, ***you are behaving like an undertaker, for example, when you:***

- ***Turn your calling or ministry into a family business;***
- ***Focus the bulk of your revivals on prosperity seminars and workshops, not leading sinners to Christ;***
- ***Neglect Bible reading and regular prayer sessions in your home;***
- ***Show bad examples to your family/wards on questions of integrity.***

So, watch what Bible others are reading when they see you going more for their goods than for their good. Paul warned Timothy, saying, "Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" [1 Tim. 6: 9-10]. ***God's gifts are for you to glorify Him. Anything else is idolatry!***

b) *Tendency to behave like bulldozers!*

A bulldozer levels everything in sight and it is only subject to the control of its driver. ***Believers behave like bulldozers when they are self-centred.*** They want everybody to defer to them but they will not respect others, including those who are superior to them by age or position. If it is not their way, then it is not the way!

The Scribes and the Pharisees behaved like that towards Jesus. They knew little or nothing about God and His word, compared to Jesus. Yet, at every turn, they challenged His authority and refused to see Him as the Messiah.

Bulldozers scare away others from God and His Christ. You are a bulldozer, for example, when you:

- ***Refuse or neglect to develop/mentor subordinates who can succeed you;***

- *Get envious of those who are better than you are, instead of learning from them;*
- *Refuse to apologise when you are wrong, but refuse to forgive when you are offended;*
- *Are too big to learn or are suffering from superiority complex!*

So, if you find yourself behaving like a bulldozer, ask for forgiveness because pride goes before a fall [**Prov. 16: 18**]. *Learn to be humble and let God exalt you [Ps. 75: 6-7]*. That way, you will become an authentic Bible that others may read.

c) *But it is better for you to be a beacon of light ALWAYS!*

The beacon of light provides light for far and near places because it is on the highest point. Jesus told His listeners during the Sermon on the Mount, “You are the light of the world... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see you good works and glorify your Father in heaven” [**Matt. 5: 14-16**]. *Beacons of light are the true followers of Christ and they are known by their show of the fruit of the Holy Spirit [Gal. 5: 22-23]. Only believers who can remain beacons of light on a sustainable basis can represent the true Bibles that others may read.*

In sum, here is what Paul is saying to us: *As a believer, you are Christ’s ambassador on earth. Every embassy is an integral part of the nation that owns it. That is why the staff of an embassy enjoys diplomatic immunity, that is, they cannot be arrested or tried by their host countries without the consent of their home countries. As Christ’s ambassador, you are a citizen of heaven. How well do you represent heaven while here on earth? It is only when your conduct here reflects the one back there. When you are a true believer in Christ, then you are a good Bible for your family, friends, colleagues, fellow church members and non-believers to read.*

3. Conclusion: Christ is the Light of the world!

After rescuing the woman caught in adultery from the hands of the scribes and Pharisees who had wanted to stone her to death, Jesus told the crowd, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” [**Jn 8: 12**]. Thank God we are His professed followers and you are one of us. But are others following you to come to Christ? Only you can answer that!

Indeed, you may be the only Bible others read. Think about that!