

LOOK WHO IS PUSHING GOD'S PLAN!

Today's Text: (1) Ezra, Chap. 1; (2) Matt. 24: 3-14

Extracts:

1. Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, *the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem... and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God) [Ezra 1: 1-3].*
2. Now as He sat on Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" And *Jesus answered and said to them..."And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" [Matt. 24: 3, 4a, 14].*

When Jesus commanded His disciples and future followers like us to go and preach the gospel "to all nations," and that He would be with us always "even to the end of the age" [Matt. 28: 19-20], one could get the impression that you had to be a believer to push this plan of God. As the signs of end times show in the growing wickedness and violence in the world [Matt. 24: 4-26], there is a sense of urgency that the gospel be preached to all nations before Christ's return. Some people see the Christian cable television networks, such as the TBN and the EWTN, as God's miraculous provision to fulfil His word. Unfortunately, however, we are losing ground in the so-called traditional Christian territories. In Europe and North America, which tend to be regarded as traditionally Christian nations, secularism has taken over. Immorality [such as same-sex marriages] is being legislated as civil rights. You cannot even mention God in state documents, not to talk of praying or preaching in schools and public places.

*Then, out of the blues comes help from unexpected quarters: **Hollywood**, the movie capital of the world! Never mind that Mel Gibson is a practising Christian. The fact that his epic movie, **The Passion of the Christ**, has overtaken Harry Potter movies in Box Office ticket sales, suggests that a revolution is in the making. The cross of Christ, which is the power of God [1 Cor. 1:18] is what sets Christianity apart from other world religions. It is now being openly discussed everywhere in America and the trend is expected throughout the world. Look who is pushing God's plan! This is not new either. It has happened before. In today's lesson, we shall see how God used a non-believer to rebuild Jerusalem and return the Jewish exiles home in continuation of God's plan to send the Messiah for the salvation of the world*

1. God looks at labour, not label!

The Passion of the Christ is reported to have grossed over US\$200 million in North America alone within the first two weeks of its release. It is expected to make more than US\$1 billion by the time it is released to other countries. The movie is said to have attracted adults, aged 18-49, the very group that has abandoned church going and the gospel in the last 20 years or so. In fact, the CBS, one of the top three national television networks in America, has been inspired to bring back its 2000 miniseries on “Jesus”!¹

What lessons do we as believers learn from this development? The first is that the time has come to drop our *labels* (denominational tags) and dwell on the *labour* that God has given us. For too long, what we have counted as conversions is actually a movement of Christians from one denomination to another! Some people like to be associated with the most popular labels at any particular point in time. They wear denominational labels as fashion, as if we shall go to heaven by denominations!

This problem has been with the church from early times. Writing on the subject to the Corinthians, Paul said, “It has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, ... that there are contentions among you, ... that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?...For Christ did not send me to baptize, but *to preach the gospel*, not with wisdom of words, lest *the cross of Christ* should be made of no effect” [1 Cor. 1: 11-13, 17]. The good news about *The Passion* is that it was produced by Mel Gibson, a practising Roman Catholic, and promoted among various Christian denominations, especially by the TBN, a Protestant cable television network! That in itself is a miracle.

The second point to note is that *The Passion* is also the product of Hollywood, the movie capital of the world. The most liberal and radical people can be found among actors and actresses. Hollywood has been credited with changing to a large extent the moral values of the Western world. When popular movies glorified and glamourised violence, witchcraft, divorce, adultery and same-sex love, it was only a question of time before the rest of society caught up! It is true that Hollywood had in the past made religious hit movies like *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben Hur* but those were for more conservative times and they were not about Jesus or His atoning death on the cross. Therefore, they could not have made the same impact on people to worry about their salvation as *The Passion* promises. Don’t we see the hand of God in this?

In the words of Jesus, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore *pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest*” [Matt. 9: 37-38]. It is God Himself who sends labourers to harvest souls for His

¹ ‘Jesus’ miniseries returns to CBS, www.cnn.com/2004/SHOWBIZ/Music/03/12/cbs.jesus.reut/index.html

kingdom. However, it may not be in the way that we understand it! The story of Cyrus is a case in point.

2. Cyrus was a labourer and yet not a believer!

God's promise to David was that his son, Solomon, would build "a house for My name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom *forever*" [2 Sam. 7: 13]. In due season, that is several centuries later, that throne would be established with the birth of Jesus who "shall be called the Son of the Highest and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and ... of His kingdom there will be no end" [Lk 1: 32-33]. Between the days of Solomon and the coming of Jesus, there was a disruption. As a result of the sins of the children of Israel, God permitted Babylonian rulers to invade and destroy their kingdom, and send the people into exile for a period of seventy years. The temple built by Solomon was vandalized, and all the vessels and treasures were carted away to Babylon. Before that event, God had spoken by the prophet Jeremiah as follows: "For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you and cause you to return to this place" [Jer. 29: 10].

How did God word come to pass? There had also been another prophecy concerning the restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah. Speaking through Isaiah the prophet, God said of Cyrus [Is. 44: 28-45: 1-2, 4]:

He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built," and to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid." Thus says the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held- to subdue nations before him and loose the armour of kings, to open before him the double doors, so that the gates will not be shut.... For Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not yet known Me.

Let us note the following facts about Cyrus:

- God called Cyrus for His purpose even when he had not yet known Him. God gave him victories over strong enemies, such as the Babylonian rulers before him, and led him by his right hand to do exploits. Do you know how many rulers in Moslem or Socialist countries that God will also so hold their right hands to work for His purpose? Do you know how many non-believers in China or India, Brazil or South Africa are today pushing God's plan in those countries? If President George Bush of the United States has taken such a resolute stand against same-sex marriages at a time that it is politically incorrect to do so, is it just for short term political gains from his strong Christian constituency or is there a higher power guiding his right hand?

In our various fields of human endeavour, God has endowed us with skills, wisdom and higher education. Some of us are controlling vast resources or wielding enormous power or influence in the secular world and among non-believers. We may be politicians or police officers, actors or artisans, employees or entrepreneurs. Some of us are in prison or palaces. No matter where we find ourselves, could it be by mere accident? Do we know why God has so blessed us? Do we know what He expects us to be doing right now to push His plan for human redemption? The Mayor of San Francisco who began the present frenzy of issuing licenses for same-sex marriages in America prided himself in a TV interview as a practising Christian. What a negative ambassador for Christ!

- Cyrus was not a Jew. Therefore, he could not have been one of the chosen people. However, it was God Himself who anointed him to become a liberator and a shepherd [Is. 45: 1], and a rebuilder of Jerusalem and the temple [Is. 44: 28]. God called him by his name *for the sake* of His elect, Israel. In like manner, we who are not of the elect by birth, God has made us so through our faith in His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, you may not be members of any congregation or steeped in the rituals of our denominations. But, if God has called you and anointed you to push His plan, you go ahead and do it!

No missionary introduced Gulshan Esther, a fervent Pakistani Moslem girl to Jesus but the Lord Himself!² She was the youngest daughter [out of five children] of a wealthy and famous Punjab Moslem family, descended from the prophet Mohammed through his daughter, Fatima. She had been raised strictly the Muslim way. Crippled by polio in infancy, she lost her mother early and her wealthy father did everything to make her well, including prayers in Mecca, to no avail. Her father died when she was seventeen years old. In desperation, she began to question God for not answering her prayers. A voice from within her spoke to her, promising to heal her. He introduced Himself as “Jesus the son of Mary.” He asked her to read about Him in the Quran (p. 48). From her search, she was amazed to know how much the Quran had to say about Jesus that the author, Muhammed, could not say about himself. She began to pray to this Jesus for healing. Two years later, Jesus appeared to her with His 12 Apostles and healed her (p.75)! He led her to establish her Christian ministry among Pakistani Moslems in the UK. Look who is pushing God’s plan!

- With the anointing of God on him, Cyrus established the Persian kingdom over Babylon. In the very first year of his reign, the Lord “stirred up the spirit of Cyrus” to acknowledge God’s role in his ascendancy and to proclaim that God had commanded him to “build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah” [Ezra 1: 1-2]. He asked for volunteers among God’s people, the Jews, to go back and rebuild Jerusalem and the

² See Gulshan Esther, *The Torn Veil*, London: Marshall Pickering, 1984

temple [v. 3]. He restored to them all the treasures looted from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and his successors. He also provided transportation and protection for the returning exiles [vv. 4-11].

How many of us are ready to activate God's plan for us soon after we move into our blessings? Of course, we should not move ahead of God's timing. But there are many people whose spirits have been stirred and yet have been reluctant to move. The pecks of their present jobs or offices are too attractive to give up. Political pressures and exigencies may call for caution and a "balanced" course of action. Questions, doubts, fears!

Jesus encountered such people even during His time on earth. In the absence of modern rapid transit systems, the disciples had to trek miles of dusty roads. When there was food, there was no problem. Out of euphoria, one disciple said, "Lord, I will follow You *wherever* You go." Jesus replied that unlike foxes which had holes and birds which had nests, the Son of Man had *nowhere* to lay His head. Then, excuses began to pour in! One wanted to go and bury his father first. Jesus answered him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but *you go and preach the kingdom of God.*" Another wanted to first go bid farewell to his family and Jesus told him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" [Lk 9: 57-62]. If insiders like us are reluctant to move, God will raise outsiders to go in our place.

3. Conclusion

We do not need to scratch beyond the surface to know that we are passing through perilous (dangerous) times, for people have become "lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power" [2 Tim. 3: 1-5]. People no longer endure sound doctrine and they have turned away their ears from the truth and instead lent their ears to fables [2 Tim. 4: 3, 4]. Hostility toward the church or Christians has escalated in the form of secularism in the West and *Shariah* laws in Moslem-dominated states. The devil knows that the end is near and he is doing overtime!

The stories of Cyrus and of *The Passion* suggest that our loving God is the one who *chooses the labourers* for the end time harvest. Too many churches and Christians are in the "comfort zones" where they are shielded away from reality. They are too exclusive to win souls that are in need of deliverance. They are too compromising and compromised to speak the truth of the cross with any conviction and power. They are too user-friendly where they are expected to be God-fearing. The lukewarm church cannot deliver anybody to Christ because the

devil can do a better job! When a sinner persists in sin, God allows Satan to deal with him/her. S(he) will not know when they run to Christ for help!

There is another group of Christians who are in the “come forth zones.” They may be despised by some mainstream denominations or branded right wing extremists by liberals. They have a sense of urgency about end times and would like to win as many souls as possible. They may not care what people call them; after all, did the church leaders of His time not say that Jesus was using the power of Beelzebub, the prince of the demons, to cast out demons [**Matt. 12: 24**]? Mel Gibson, the producer of *The Passion*, and some of those who are preaching the gospel of Christ through their positions in the secular world belong to this group. By their fruits, we shall know them.

Finally, there are the Cyruses, those that we may not see as believers, but whom God has called to push His redemption plan. They are small cells in the violent Moslem world or in the decadent West. They are in Carnival bands in the Caribbean or Brazil. They may be operating among the corrupt politicians in Africa or the drug cartels in Latin America. We may not see millions of converts from their efforts but God does not want a single person to perish but “that all should come to repentance” [**2 Pet. 3: 9**].

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