

## **BIBLE STUDY 4 – 11 July, 2003**

By Rev Colin La Foy

Reading from Matthew 5:13 ff

“You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is therefore good for nothing but to be cast out and to be trodden under the foot of men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick And it gives light unto all those that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

I was going to say that being salt and light is a vocation. On the contrary, Jesus says YOU ARE. It is the character, nature and the moral fibre of the Church. In order for us to understand our character traits in Christ, we need first of all to fully understand who we are.

I sometimes think that, as a Church, we suffer from a crisis of identity. The early church came out of Judaism. Embracing Jesus as the Christ meant to be ostracised, marginalised and excommunicated. The pain of being non-persons in the land of their birth – pariahs, worse than the publicans – was daunting to say the least. Declaring faith in Jesus Christ was costly, painful. All men long for acceptance, to belong, to be appreciated. The early Church was declared dead while living, rejected by friends and family, marginalised from the job market, rejected as unclean in a community which once loved and embraced them. Paul the Apostle sums up this vilification in his writing to the church at Corinth by saying: “Being defamed we entreat. We are made as the filth of this world and are the off-scouring unto this day.”

It was in this hour of crisis of “Who are we?”, no longer accepted by our community, that the Holy Ghost, through John, made this tremendous affirmation, declaration: “Beloved, now you are the Sons of God.” And it does not appear what we shall be, but when we shall see Him, we shall be like Him – now. This is your identity.

Too often the Church becomes preoccupied with the other world. It does not matter what we shall be. We don't know what we shall be. We are preoccupied with what body the dead shall return. Whose wife will she be in the next world? In order for us as a Church to fulfil our calling, it is necessary that we address the crisis of our identity. And that we see ourselves, beloved, now. We are the Sons of God. I hate to be told that I am a coloured Son of God, or a Zulu Son of God. I am a Son of God.

The post-apartheid Church suffers from paralysis due to its guilt through her complicity with apartheid. The fact is that she created a theology of respectability for a system which viciously destroyed the dignity of millions based on skin colour, texture of hair, a system which – in the name of Christ – systematically destroyed the family unit through the Migratory Labour Act. Millions of people under the age of 50 grew up in fatherless homes without male role models. The latest statistics of the American prisons claims that 70% of the prison inmates of the USA grew up in fatherless homes. Truly, as South Africans, we have sown in the wind. We now reap the whirlwind. The post-apartheid Church suffers from selective morality. “Whites made mistakes, forgive them,” say the whites. “Blacks are demons, nail them, jail them, bang them and hang them.” Blacks similarly suffer from selective morality. Blacks are heroes. Whites are demons.

The post-apartheid Church suffers from spiritual malnutrition. We in apartheid read Ephesians 4 like this in our South African Bibles. “And when he ascended he gave this unto men (unto the Church) and he gave blue apostles for the blue church, green prophets for the green church, pink pastors for the pink church and grey evangelists for the grey church.” To have a well-balanced, healthy body we need carbohydrates, vitamins, mineral salts, fats, protein, but if you eat pap for breakfast and supper every day, we will have fat stomachs and thin legs – kwashiorkor. And the Church of Jesus Christ suffers from spiritual kwashiorkor, because we succeeded to lock out of colour. We excluded those whom Christ included and included those whom Christ excluded. The post-apartheid Church now suffers from a new form of racism and arrogance, a nation where many are psychologically brutalised and traumatised.

What is our challenge? Speaking evangelistically, there are few places in the world right now where the

challenges facing the Church are as great as those facing the Church on the subcontinent. We make up less than 7% of the world population yet carry in excess of 66% of the world infection of HIV/Aids, with thousands dying weekly. Soon we will be left with millions of orphans on the subcontinent. Crime is rampant and we have succeeded in turning our homes into prisons. The rape of an eight-month-old baby temporarily shocked the nation. However, we now read of the rape of three-month-old babies. Hijacking leaves our communities reeling and traumatised. The post-apartheid Church has moved from being overt racists to being covert racists. Our credibility as the Church is seriously questioned. Frequently we claim that what we say is dependent on who the audience is. We have learned to say the right things to the right people.

A pertinent question: has the Church, has the salt, lost its savour? The role of our Church in our society, South Africa and the continent of Africa today – despite our checkered past, in spite of our failure as a Church, despite our complicity with apartheid, in spite of our selective morality, despite our spiritual malnutrition – is experiencing a renewed visitation of God unparalleled in the world. Please forgive my arrogance!

There is a depth of spirituality, a vibrancy of spirit and an explosion of church growth not really seen in many parts of the world. What a paradox! In spite of our brokenness, despite our pain, in spite of our failure, the Lord of the Church, by His rich mercy and unwavering grace, is visiting this land in a renewed way. Jonah, in Chapter 3, asked this after his disobedience and rebellion against God. Jonah 3:1 says: “And the Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.” The second commissioning, the unsurpassable grace, the unsurpassable mercy of a merciful God. Isaiah 42 reads: “A bruised reed shall He not break and smoking flax shall He not quench?” That God has such love for us..!

A world chess champion was visiting an art gallery, the story goes, when he came across a portrait in which Lucifer, with a glint in his eye, stared across the chess board. On the other side sat a crestfallen man. At the bottom of the portrait was the words: “Check mate!” The chess player looked at it. He walked around and looked at it from every angle. He spent two hours, and finally he broke the silence of that great gallery and shouted: “IT IS NOT CHECK MATE! THE KING HAS ONE MORE MOVE!”

The King has one more move! And they sealed the tomb. And Lucifer, with a glint in his eye, cried: “Check mate!” But friends, the King has one more move!

Failed Church of South Africa, broken, bound in guilt, I have good news for you. Though we may condemn ourselves and the failure in our own hearts may condemn us, The King has one more move!! He declares “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” He has confidence in you and me. He has called us co-labourers. We can rise to the challenge of the pain in this hour. We can remain beating our breast in despair, or, like Esther, be challenged out of comfort zones and complacency, challenged by the crisis of our people, our own inadequacies and the Word of God. For “Who knows whether you have come to the Kingdom for a time such as this?”

Like Esther, we can stretch out our hands to the offered sceptre of an all-forgiving, merciful God and rise to the challenge to become real Christians in a real world.

I challenge you to rise to the challenge by releasing our brothers who may continue to hurt us, forgiving them even as we have received forgiveness, by embracing those who are dying of HIV/Aids, by beginning the psychological healing of our nation, by restoring self-worth, through the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And I want to say that South Africa does not need a new Constitution or another Bill of Human Rights. We have it all. But the Bill of Human Rights is not the answer to the sick problem of our society. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the answer to our solution.

In conclusion, in working to restore the self-worth of our nation, Jesus Christ was challenged with a question: “What is the greatest commandment?” in an attempt to trap Him. And He answered: “Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your mind and with all of your soul, and then love your neighbour as you love yourself.” There are three “to be loved” – God, our neighbour and ourselves. But I want to make this statement. You cannot begin to love your neighbour – you will burgle his home and rape his wife and kill him, you will never begin to love God – until we can love ourselves.

Our human worth has been destroyed, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not command men to love

God. On the contrary, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has come to declare: "For God so loved fallen, broken, damaged man, that He gave His Son to die on the cross for him." The premium that God places on you and me is so great, He gave the best that Heaven could afford. He gave His Son. We need to rise from the ashes of brokenness and take our place as God sees us and embrace what He wants of us.

There is a dying Africa and a dying world, with a post-Church Europe waiting. I believe that out of the continent of Africa will emerge salt and light, not darkness from a dark continent but the Light of Jesus Christ to take the glad tidings of great joy and the good news to a dying continent and to a dying world. It's not the first time Africa has played such a role in ushering in the Gospel the Christ, who had fallen under the weight of the cross, slipping in his own blood on the Via Dolorosa. Already the Hill of the Skull was in view, but He didn't have the power to rise Himself under the weight of the cross. He slipped again to fall headlong, face first. It was Simon of Cyrene, an African, who took the cross while the whole world waited for redemption. Again I want to say: out of Africa will arise light and out of Africa will arise salt. The world waits. I leave you with this question: how long will you, Church of the Living Christ, keep that dying world waiting?