

## The Message of the Sermon on the Mount in the Multi-Religious Context of India

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As the largest peninsula of the world, India is the land of religious pluralism. From the time immemorial, all religions have preached the eternal values and virtues of the universal brotherhood of man, peace, love and compassion. But in the real life, the broken relationships between humankind on the basis of colour, caste and religion has been evident and it is in its zenith in the beginning of the twenty-first century. There is much truth even today in what Jonathan Swift had said more than a century ago that, "we have enough religions to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."<sup>1</sup> In a democratic country like India, people are aware of the consequences of the religious fundamentalism which happened in the last few years. For instance, the problem of 'Ramajamabhoomi-Babri Masjid' affected not only Indians; but it has a worldwide effect. In the same manner, the atrocities emerged against Christians throughout the country damaged the status of Indians before others. For the eradication of these problems, India is eagerly waiting for a relevant message of 'peace'.

In the present day situation, the message of Jesus in 'the Sermon on the Mount' (Mt. 5-7) can present a paradigm society. His teachings are not 'mere commandments', but are grounded in the fact that the promise of the future reign of God clearly guarantees specific human conduct. The peace which is explained in 'the Sermon on the Mount' can make a special influence upon the people than all other Scriptures.<sup>2</sup> Here it is worthy to mention that Geevarghese Mar Osthathios says about the Sermon on the Mount that, "it is not eschatological ethics to be practiced in the world to come, as no one there is likely to beat on our right cheek or sue and take our coat... Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy take it as a blue-print for life here and now..."<sup>3</sup> What Jesus here says and demands cannot be reduced to a few religious or ethical principles; but it can present a religious harmonious society.

To have a clear understanding of 'peace' in the Sermon on the Mount; it is necessary to analyse certain particular passages from the Sermon.

### **The Mission of Peace- Making (cf. Mt. 5:9)**

The famous pronouncement in Mt. 5:9, in which "peace makers" actually represents the Greek "peace-doers" (*eirenopoioi*) with the presence of the Greek root "do" (*poi-*) expressing

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activity of peace, i.e., resolute initiative taken in the sphere of human relations<sup>4</sup>. Here peace-makers are the persons, who bring about peace between enemies. 'Making peace' refers to a peaceful attitude in the community as a sign of divine wisdom - with God and with the people. As Vasant P. Dandin says, "peace is that by which the spiritual unity of the corporate life of the church is to be maintained and this life has to be shared with our neighbours-our friends and enemies. Thus we became the peace-makers, sharing the genuine love and durable peace which we receive from Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

In India the pronouncement of Jesus, "Blessed are the Peace-Makers" has unique importance; and it is a challenge to take initiative to make peace between warring religious groups. Making peace is the responsibility of every humanbeing, and that world peace can come about only if there is peace among religions. To move towards peace, we need to move away from conflicts, tensions, violence and oppression. It has to be sought, pursued, attained and maintained. "*peace between religions*," as Hans Kung holds, "is the first essential peace we should work for if this world has to know peace in all other areas of life."<sup>6</sup>

In our own context, every people should get involve in the ministry of reconciliation, communal harmony and promote peace and goodwill among the religions. Every churches, temples, mosques and gurudwaras should be essentially a seedbed of peace and reconciliation, open to all, i.e., to both rich and poor, educated or illiterate, of any religion or caste. According to K. Hussain, "it is imperative that religions must be used as an instrument of universal love and compassion, not to divide but to unite the peoples belonging to diverse and different races, languages, creeds and religious faiths into one universal brotherhood of man."<sup>7</sup>

True religion can be defined as communion between humanbeings and God, and between humanbeings among themselves. Viewed from this perspective it becomes quite evident that many of the activities undertaken by the self-styled religious zealots in the name of God and country are truly anti-religious, anti-God and anti-human. The need of the hour is a genuine critique of religion and an earnest search for the true religious spirit by the adherents of all religions. Only then will the endeavour to promote peace and harmony be a truly religious undertaking.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Love People of other Faiths (cf. Mt. 5:43-47)**

The commandment of Jesus, "love your enemies" is the most sublime piece of morality ever given to man. In the time of Jesus enemies were usually hated, and the hatred was not deemed alien from true religion.<sup>9</sup> The Jews considered the neighbours as those of the Jewish race, and all others were considered by them as natural enemies.<sup>10</sup> But Jesus would have no fences around the word 'neighbour'. So also to the Christian the word 'neighbour' is as wide as humankind. There is nothing greater than to imitate God in doing good to our enemies. God's love is universal; he lavishes sunlight on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. God gives us example in our own lives; we have received in nature and supremely in Christ a love we don't deserve and we must try to treat all men in that same heavenborn love. That love also must direct towards the whole environment.

In a pluralistic country like India, one's neighbour can be from any caste, race, religion or status. It implies the right and fair relationship with the neighbours who are Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, Dalits etc. The dignity of the people of other faiths have to be accepted. We need a language of love, tolerance, humanness and

fraternity in the context of communalism and ethnic conflicts. M. Stephen states, "the principle of neighbour-love has a special significance in the context of religio-cultural, socio-economic and political pluralism."<sup>11</sup>

Instead of developing hatred, the communities should involve in the common-quest of building up a world community of justice, equality and peace. As Jesus meant we are expected not to have any fences around the word neighbour; we should act in goodwill from God toward other religious people. People should treat others with the heavenborn love, which Jesus expressed throughout His life and ministry. That deeprooted love will transform our warring society into an abode of mutual respect and peace.

### **Resist Not Evil (cf. Mt. 5:38-42)**

The Jews always thought that every outrage should be resented; and thus the spirit of hatred and strife was fostered. The Code of Hammurabi and the Roman Law required that the wrongdoer should get as "good as he gave."<sup>12</sup> Thus the world of Jesus' day was under the law of retaliation.

The New Law on revenge by Jesus Christ says: If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (Mt. 5:39), that is rather than avenge oneself, the sufferer is asked to undergo patiently a repetition of the same injury. What Jesus meant here is that one should not repel one outrage by another. The rich and radiant personality of Jesus cast a fascinating spell over Gandhiji. According to him, the ideas which underlie the Gujarati hymn: "If a man gives you a drink of water and you give him drink in return, that is nothing; Real beauty consists in doing good against evil, and the teaching of Jesus, 'Resist not evil...' should revolutionise the whole life."<sup>13</sup> Jesus asks his followers not to resist the evildoer with measures that arise from an unloving, unforgiving, vindictive disposition. As William Klassen, a Mennonite finds, "the way to peace" in non-retaliatory enemy love, tried to and "modeling" a coherent life of discipleship.<sup>14</sup>

The growing casteism and other social discriminations of our country can be hindered by atrimsic way of life which Jesus ahimsic, and that alone can transform our selfish world into a land of love and peace for all. It is non-violent life style that makes a person authentically human, because it is a distinctive feature, arising from the very human nature. Gandhiji says: realisation of Truth (which for him was another name for God) is not possible without 'ahimsa'. We need an active, creative, and consistent non-violence in our heart to enter truly into others' faith-convictions-as friends enter each others' home and hearts."<sup>15</sup> This is the best way to overcome most of the problems occur in the present day society in the name of religion. According to S.V.D. Poruthur, "the acme of perfection of loving one's neighbour consists in forgiving those who have harmed us physically or caused us mental pain and anguish, perhaps by slander or calumny, and reconciling ourselves with them and proceeding a step further not only to with them well but also to do positive good to them."<sup>16</sup>

In the present day context of growing religious conflicts, Jesus' teachings have more importance and it can help the people to keep them away from violent and evil means. People can follow Jesus as a good example for the practical demonstration of the applicability of his teachings to form a non-violent and peaceful society.

**Be Free from Anger and Jealousy (cf. Mt. 5:21-26)**

Under the Old Law murder and other 'extreme' offences are reckoned guilt of death, but according to Jesus' New Law angry and temper are similarly judged. His law has universal sway, and every man/woman is a brother-man/sister-woman under God's Fatherhood. Killing is not done by knives alone, but by contemptuous sneers and by the casual indifference that disregards the dignity of human beings. The Rabbinic statement that "Whoever hates his neighbour is to be counted with those who shed blood come very close to it."<sup>17</sup> In the words of Jesus it is made clear that there is no longer a sharp line between 'willing' and 'acting'. Wishing to kill is as bad as killing; what is needed is a new heart, created by God.<sup>18</sup> Jesus tells plainly that if we have any malice, hatred, ill-will, scornful anger against our brother/sister we are guilty of a breach of the commandment: "thou shall not kill."

When in the spirit of contempt and utter disgust anyone says to his brother, "Raca", probably Aramaic and meaning, "you blockhead" (or "you empty-head") he is worthy of being condemned to death by the (Jewish) Supreme Court (the Sanhedrin). Similarly, when in that same frame of mind and heart he says, "you fool" (or "You moron", "You idiot") he deserves to die. Moreover, that the Lord is not just thinking of physical death but of eternal death is clear from the wording, "he deserves to be cast into the hell (Gehenna) of fire."<sup>19</sup> The re-interpretation of Jesus of the sixth commandment demands that the heart must at all times be filled with love, not with anger and hatred.<sup>20</sup>

In a multi-religious society like India, people should not use unnecessary words against others. Otherwise the anguish and jealous mentality may lead people to brutal and violent actions and even to murder. Religion should not be an agent of woe and distress. There is no need for anyone to desist another's religion. Every people must understand that religion is not to fight with but to serve the humanity. The fight and murder in the name of religion is a worst evil. According to Prof. Rasheeduddin Khan, "ultimately every human is man in origin and in many characteristics. Welfare of humanity and promotion of love and charity towards fellow-human beings is a basic ethical responsibility."<sup>21</sup> If people understand their basic responsibility and keep themselves away from using unnecessary words, it is possible to make a society without anger, jealousy and murder.

**Do not Criticise People of Other Faiths (cf. Mt. 7:1-5)**

Through the saying, 'do not judge or you too will be judged' (Mt.7:1-5), Jesus encourages both self-discipline and mutual discipline among people. According to Jesus' words, the habitual self-righteous faultfinder must remember that he himself can expect to be condemned and this not only by men but also and especially by God (Mt.6: 14,15; cf. 18:23-35).<sup>22</sup> The standard of judgement that men apply to others will be applied to themselves.

A figurative description of and a warning to, carping critics follows in vss. 3-5. Now in the figure which Jesus uses, he asks the average listener how it is that he is gazing at a mere speck in his brother's eye, and that he even requests permission to remove that speck, while at the same time he completely overlooks the incomparably larger beam in his own eye (cf. Jn. 8:7).<sup>23</sup>

In India this teaching of Jesus has much importance in the religious side. Every Indian should understand that, even though there are differences in faith and practices everyone must give respect to his/her neighbour and his/her faith. Open criticism of other faiths will

hurt the feelings of others. Instead of developing rivalry through judging others and considering religion, caste, colour, race, purity of blood etc., every people should take initiative to nourish and cherish an endeavor of mediation and mutual respect among people.<sup>24</sup> As the promoters of peace, all Indians are to keep themselves away from exclusivistic mentalities. According to S.J. Samartha, “exclusive claims isolate the community of faith, that makes them alienated from neighbours of other faiths. They create tensions and disturb relationships within the larger community.”<sup>25</sup>

The exclusivistic mentality of people attempts to prove the uniqueness of their religion and to criticize others. But Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, expressed His dissatisfaction towards the self-righteous faultfinders. It is through the obedience of the teaching of Jesus : don’t judge,” we are able to come closer with others and to make possible a society of peaceful co-existence. But if, on the otherhand, we judge others it will be returned to us in the same standard of judgement; and thus the harmonious existence of the society will be challenged.<sup>26</sup>

### **Be a Perfect Human (cf. Mt. 5:48)**

God Himself is the grand law, sole giver, and only pattern of the perfection which he recommends to his children. The words here (cf. Mt. 5:48) are very emphatic, *esesthe oun humeis teleion*, ye shall be therefore Perfect-ye shall be filled with the spirit of that God whose name is mercy, and whose nature is Love.<sup>27</sup> Certainly the word “perfect” (*teleioi*) is also close to the Hebrew equivalent meaning “without spot” or “without moral blemish”.<sup>28</sup> In the LXX it is used in relation to men like Noah-“a righteous man, blameless in his generation” (Gen. 6:9).<sup>29</sup> Our perfection begins when as Paul Tillich translates the phrase, we begin to “be all-inclusive as (our) heavenly Father is all-inclusive.”<sup>30</sup> At the same time the parallel Lk. 6:38 pronounces, “be merciful.”

“Perfect” in Matthew’s understanding is complete, whole, full-grown, mature, accomplished or perfect in its kind. Jesus calls God perfect, not because God is aloof and totally unlike man, but precisely the reverse: God is totally, undividedly devoted to man; he is faithful to His covenant; He is totally given to those He loves. According to Thurston, “...we are called to show the perfection of God’s love which does not limit who the neighbour is, which does not draw lines between the good and the evil, the just and the unjust. We know it to be from but not of us, when our desire to follow after Jesus, we can “do good to when we don’t feel good toward.”<sup>31</sup> Thus in Christ there must be no limit to friendship and kindness should never be fractional.

The concept of peace in the Greek and the Hebrew thoughts,<sup>32</sup> is a state of wholeness in the physical and spiritual dimensions and relating not only to the individual but also the entire communities and relationships among persons. Jesus’ ethical teachings in the Sermon on the Mount enable people to be ‘Whole’ in their life towards the relationship with others. According to Jesus, the culminating point of perfection is the Father, who is in Heaven. The perfection or the wholeness of a person should be reflected through his activities, i.e., through both words and deeds. A perfect man is expected to relate himself with others, even when the caste, colour, race, religion etc., are different. People should be mature and inclusivistic as heavenly Father is all-inclusive. Everybody should accept the equal status of others, even though other elements vary.<sup>33</sup> Since the model of our perfection as presented by Jesus is

the Heavenly Father, who deals with His creation indiscriminately, we the Indians are supposed to maintain such a character in our dealings with the people of other faiths. Thus the teachings of Jesus 'to be perfect as the Heavenly Father is perfect, can be presented as an ample and paradigm message for the world of disharmony.

### **Do Good Unto Others (cf. Mt. 7:12)**

The teaching in Mt. 7:12 is probably the most universally famous thing, that Jesus ever said. With this commandment the Sermon on the Mount reaches its summit and its peak. This saying of Jesus has been called 'the capstone of the whole discourse'.<sup>34</sup> This is the topmost peak of social ethics, and the Everest of all ethical teaching. One formulation of it is ascribed to Hillel, the greatest of 1<sup>st</sup> Century rabbis: "what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah, all else is interpretation."<sup>35</sup>

The Golden Rule which Jesus advocates in the Sermon on the Mount is positive. He taught that the essence of righteousness is the constructive doing of good, and not the negative, avoidance of sin.<sup>36</sup> The parable of 'Last Judgement' (Mt. 25:31-46) and the 'Good Samaritan' (Lk.10:25-37) are good examples of His emphasis on activity. When this rule is put positively, when we are told that we must actively to do to others what we would have them do to us, a new principle enters into life and a new attitude to our Fellowmen. Here we are to treat our Fellowmen not as the law allows, but as love demands. According to William Barclay, "it is perfectly possible for a man of the world to observe the negative form of the golden rule. He could without very serious difficulty so discipline his life that he would not do not others what he did not with them to do to him; but the only man who can even begin to satisfy the positive form of the rule in the man who has the love of Christ within his heart."<sup>37</sup>

Here, Jesus' teaching prohibits the ancient attitudes and activities of people towards others. In a religiously pluralistic country like India people should not treat badly that people of other faiths. If anyone behaves politely towards others, the same can be expected from them. It should be understood by everyone that, 'whatever is sown, the same will be reaped' (Gal.6:7). This is a new principle enters into life and a new attitude to Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains etc.<sup>38</sup>

Jesus through His teachings exhorting the people of the world to make good relationships, and mutual - respect without considering of any external or internal matters. As people from different religious, cultural and social backgrounds, Indians should treat others well and wholeheartedly. This is what Jesus' topmost peak of social ethics to establish His positive Golden Rule in the human hearts and societies at large.

### **Conclusion**

Through our discussion on the teachings of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, we have seen what a vital role can the teachings play for the peaceful co-existence of different religious people. The teachings of Jesus, especially on peace and harmony is absolutely a message for the universe and have more relevance in the multi-religious context of India to make a paradigm society. As the Sermon is the topmost peak of social ethics, it provides Indian Christian Theology with hermeneutical stimulus for development. It is a message of peace and harmony, both among human beings and between God and humanity. The acceptance of such a message by the people can lead our nation to a state of wholeness and perfection, and

which in turn helps our country to enjoy prosperity, peace and tolerance.

The evil practices in our country such as: untouchability, discrimination towards dalits and tribals, communal tendencies, politicization and corruption of religion, fundamentalistic attitudes, hostile tendencies, and intra-ecclesial communalism can be eliminated through a commitment and obedience to the love-centred teachings of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount asks the people to show the perfect character in their dealings with others, just as God Himself is perfect in His dealings, even with evil and unjust. Thus it will make the society to be a community of fellowship and harmony of peace and prosperity and thus enjoying the blessings and favours of all people.

## NOTES

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30. Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 35f.
31. Thurston, *Interpretation*, 173.
32. The Hebrew concept *Salom* is a state of 'wholeness' both in the physical and spiritual dimension, and also in our relationships in the community life. Similar with Hebrew, the Greek concept *eirene* describes an international calm and a relationship of 'goodwill' between God and human beings and a state of reconciliation and wholeness among a group of people.
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