

The way Jesus commands - Mission 3 (20/4/08)

'What are you looking for?' (John 1:38) are the opening words of Jesus in John's gospel. Throughout the narrative men and women from different religious traditions are searching for something and their search culminates in an encounter with Jesus. In chapter 3 Jesus is encountered by Nicodemus. Chapter 4 a woman of Samaria. Chapter 12 some Greeks.

Read 12:24. On the other side of the cross will emerge a new humanity, a people of God comprising both Jew and gentile united under his gracious rule.

Freedom and Suffering

Jesus appears the freest of human beings. While he gives himself for others, including enemies, they do not determine how he should serve them. This really challenges the world's views of freedom.

Jesus is free to suffer for us. A suffering God is something that the world finds hard to understand. Yet it is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that provoked a radical rethinking of what the transcendence of God actually means.

Suffering and Mission

How will the Church witness to God? (Read 12:26) Where is Jesus? About to die.

So where should we be? The disciple community.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said from a prison cell in 1944. 'To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to

cultivate some form of asceticism, but to be a man. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.'

Christians suffer for a variety of reasons. We suffer the same things as all other humans.

We also suffer from our foolishness. Brash evangelisation; When we go to war against a Muslim state, churches in predominantly Muslim countries come under threat of mob violence.

But when Christians choose to go and serve in difficult places and hard situations, it is then that we are falling into the earth and dying like grains of wheat.

Imagination time. It's AD 251 North African city of Carthage. Epidemic of Measles. Bishop Cyprian preaches from Matthew 5:43-48. Urging Christians not to protect their own lives, nor even be concerned about the survival of the Church, but to love their enemies who have recently been persecuting them.

Pagans who had been cared for through the crisis by Christians were likely to be open to a faith that, unlike their own, had actually worked.

The way of Jesus, then, is the way he calls his Church to go. It is finding a different way. Not to retreat from the world into religious sanctuary, nor engaging with the world on its own terms, but an unflinching yet vulnerable challenge to the powers that control the present world order.

Mission and transformation

John 12:25 again.

The church engages in mission not only in order that the world may be transformed, but that the church may be transformed more into the truth and purity of the Lord.

For the Christian, dialogue is the fundamental aspect of bearing witness to the truth of Christ. 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Cor. 4:6), there will always be the place for humble listening. For it's the desire to communicate that motivates us to listen well.

Mission and unity

The Christian life begins with the receiving, not the giving, of service. We can only love because we ourselves have been loved. We can lead others to a new community only when we ourselves have learned to be led.

He has set us the example and given us a new commandment. 'Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (13:34-35). Repeated in 17:21 and 17:23

Clearly for Jesus the most powerful apologetic for the Gospel is the deepening visible unity of the disciple community here and across the world.

In many cities this is happening. Happening here. Next week. The communication of the gospel is not primarily the work of visiting evangelists; rather, it is the work of local Christian communities who patiently articulate to others what Christ is doing so obviously in their own collective life.

Jesus teaches us they way to be in mission. The disciple-community of Jesus, walking in the footsteps of their Master, must be prepared to be buried in a world of cruelty, poverty, bigotry, violence, hopelessness - the same world which crucified their Master. The church that seeks security, prestige and worldly power is no longer the church of the crucified Jesus. The gospel is lived out in the public squares of the world. George Macleod founder of the Iona Community wrote.

'I simple argue that the Cross be raised again in the centre of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; on a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew, Latin and Greek; at the kind of place where cynics talked smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where He dies and that is what He died about. And that is where churchmen should be and what churchmen should be about.'