

Shouting Above the Storm

Speaking out about injustice



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Prelude (JI)

I am going to begin with a rant and if there any of my few remaining friends or members of my family in the audience, I give them permission to leave now. The trouble with the title 'speaking out against injustice' is that we – you and I – are part of the problem rather than the solution.

Many years ago I heard Professor Bruce asked the question: which group that we encounter in the gospels do evangelicals most resemble? He answered unhesitatingly 'the Pharisees'. I was quite shocked. But the more I have thought about it since, the truer this seemed. Are we like John the Baptist and the Essenes? – no deserts for us: there's not a trace of asceticism among us evangelicals and we're proud of it. The Zealots then? Heavens no! Revolutionary politics is the last thing that we're into. Are we the poor to whom the good news is preached? I don't think so. Just wander round the car park and you'll see what I mean. I know: it's the disciples. Well, possibly, but on the whole evangelicals are much more interested in salvation than discipleship; we leave that to the Mennonites and the Anabaptists.

I reckon it's the Pharisees – good, earnest, respectable folk, familiar with the Scriptures, elect (i.e. not like other people), concerned about all sorts of 'purity codes', particularly purity of doctrine. We could press this a little further. The Pharisees are the evangelicals, the Sadducees are the liberals – a bit too reductionist and rationalistic for their own good, but, if truth be told, coming from the same stable as we do, and the Scribes are the college lecturers. Always telling people what they should do, but seldom doing it themselves.

Where is all this leading to? Have you noticed that fundamentally what Jesus had against the religious leaders of his day was not that they were religious but that they used their religion as a cloak for injustice. 'Woe to you Pharisees. For you tithe the mint and rue and herbs of all kinds and neglect justice and the love of God' (Luke 11:42). 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in church and places of honour at conferences. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers' (Luke 20:46,7).

The trouble is that God requires justice first and religion a long way second. Religious people like the Pharisees did not like to be reminded of this and their spiritual children are no different. John Lilburne the seventeenth century Puritan radical attacked the religious establishment of his day in these words: 'And if any gilded or varnished Scribe or Pharisee...find themselves aggrieved, I desire to let them know that *fiat justitia ruat coelum* (let justice be done though the heavens fall) is my motto, and if I perish, it shall be in the following of justice for justice' sake.' And so to our subject.

Justice and mission in the Bible

I believe that the Biblical idea of justice provides us with a key to mission, especially in stormy times. Waldon Scott's book *Bring Forth Justice*, which attempts in effect a Biblical basis of mission, picks up on this idea. Scott is of course referring to the first Servant Song (in Isaiah 42) where the Servant's task is to 'bring forth justice' and I am sure that you are well aware that Matthew applies this passage directly to Jesus (Matthew 12:18-21) with particular reference to his ministry on Galilee. We sometimes fail to recognise the importance

of the idea because the key words in the Biblical languages have a wider meaning than our English word 'justice' and are translated into a number of different words in our English versions ('judgement' commonly in the AV). The force of the concept in both OT and NT is that justice is always *interventionary*. It is not an abstract concept, and a judge is not only someone who offers an impartial verdict having heard the evidence, but one who intervenes on behalf of the oppressed, those who are already being unfairly treated or who are helpless in the face of powers that are too strong for them. Yahweh is the judge of the Israelites as well as the Egyptians at the Exodus (Exodus 6:6). He is not one who waits for the outcome in order, as I say, to give an impartial verdict. He comes down and gets involved 'rolls up his sleeves and gets his hands dirty'. The judges are called 'judges' precisely because Yahweh appoints them to rescue Israel from their oppressors. In Isaiah God puts his Spirit upon his Servant so that he may bring justice to the nations. In a universal extension this means salvation for the nations and mercy to the oppressed. God himself sends forth his justice as a light for the peoples (51:4) that will mean deliverance and salvation for them (51:5). Jesus' role is to minister to 'the bruised reed' and 'the smouldering wick' and, in restoring them, 'lead justice to victory' (Matthew 12:20). In the humiliation of the cross Jesus' justice is taken away so that he might restore it to those who did not have it (Acts 8:33 quoting Isaiah 53:8). Seen in this way justice is 'the good news to the poor' (Luke 4:18), it is God's deliverance. Not in any abstract sense, but because Jesus is proclaiming Jubilee Year, 'the year of the Lord's acceptance', when what Ched Myers calls 'Sabbath Economics' will be put into effect.

Doing justice is how we know God

'The Lord has made himself known, he has executed justice...for the needy shall not always be forgotten (Psalm 9:16,18). Understanding the character of God as deliverer of the oppressed is to know who God really is. We really get to know God, not so much in the place of quiet and retreat but when we participate with him in the work of deliverance in 'bringing forth justice'. There is an instructive oracle that Jeremiah delivers to King Jehoiakim. The King had been building a palace for himself by forced labour and Jeremiah scathingly contrasts his behaviour with that of his father 'good king Josiah'. Notice the punch line. (Jeremiah 22:13-16).

I remember going to a conference on 'knowing God'. One talk was on 'knowing God in Scripture', another on 'knowing God in the quiet place'. Somebody, a missionary from India, told us a story about being in Delhi bus station. There was a woman in obvious physical distress, her sari covering her face, writhing and groaning, in the grip of some fearsome, perhaps contagious, illness, and on the whole people were avoiding her – too embarrassed or fearful, or perhaps just not wanting to be involved. We might say that helping that woman, giving her a drink, getting her to a safe place, finding some medical care, was what the Bible calls 'bringing forth justice'. But for our missionary friend it was, she recalled, supremely a time for 'knowing God'. God was there in a way that she had never experienced before.

I think that leads us to a number of assertions that connect directly with the theme of this conference. 'In the eye of the storm' is where we meet God. Shouting above the storm – speaking out about injustice, standing up for the poor, taking a stand on justice issues – is preaching the gospel. It is our mission because it is Jesus' mission, which is God's mission, *missio dei*.

Doing justice is context specific

What we also have to say is that God's mission seen from our perspective is context specific. It is time bound, part of history, part of *our* history. We 'know God' by discovering what is our part in the divine drama, and playing it. Jesus blamed the Jewish leaders in his day for not 'interpreting the present time'. (See Luke 12:54-6, also Matthew 16:1-4 and Luke 19:41-4.) They did not perceive that the nation was heading for disaster and it was their responsibility

to steer it away from it. N.T. Wright puts it this way: 'This was the challenge that Jesus gave to his contemporaries: give up the tradition that has so gripped you, which is driving you toward the cliff-edge of ruin.' Their lack of perception was spiritual blindness, hypocrisy, and hardness of heart and Jesus wept about this situation (Luke 19:41). This was not a matter ultimately of discernment. They knew what to do but did not want to obey; because it might mean a loss of privilege and power.

But that was *their* context and *their* task. Others have to serve their generation, to be weather forecasters of the storm that is blowing in on them.

- For Abraham it was leaving Ur and the adventure of faith
- For the prophets it was the issue of religion and righteousness
- For Haggai and Zechariah it was the rebuilding of the temple
- For Paul it was the mission to the Gentiles
- For Luther it was preaching justification by faith
- For Carey it was 'attempting great things for God' in India
- For Christians in Nazi Europe it was the question of their Jewish neighbour
- For white South African Christians it was apartheid
- For Christians today it may be ...

Each day, as we have seen, has its issue. Not yesterday's issues or my neighbour's task. No use going to Israel or Palestine and not talking politics or to South America and not being concerned about poverty. For each one of us this is *the eye of the needle, the narrow road*. To turn aside from this task is the double-mindedness of which James speaks, it is the lame excuse of the man who hid his talent, it is the worship of the beast.

I have been reading and thinking recently about the history of the Jewish tragedy in Nazi Europe – books about the fate of the Jews in Vienna after the Anschluss; about Louis Darquier who was responsible for the internment and transportation of Jews from France to the concentration camps; about the Italian Primo Levi who survived Auschwitz, and so on. Here in Europe our response to Fascism (at least up to 1945) was 'the eye of the needle'. [clip from 'Au Revoir Les Enfants']. It pointed up, in a dramatic way, that there were choices to be made to do with fundamental justice issues. But perhaps we can stay at that particular moment in history too long. We Brits, at least, feel rather pleased with ourselves about the Nazi episode and the Second World War. After all, we like to think we were partners in a great coalition that overthrew tyranny and delivered freedom. But what about this? [clip from 'Amazing Grace']

[Discuss in groups: What is 'our context and therefore our 'big issue'']

Trends (CR)

1. The growing gap between the rich and poor

If the World were a village...

Its population of 1,000 would be made up of:

60 North Americans

80 South Americans

86 Africans

210 Europeans

564 Asians

700 would be coloured

300 would be white

There would be 300 Christians

60 would own half the total wealth

500 would not have enough to eat

600 would live in the slums

700 would be illiterate

Since 1980 around 15 countries have enjoyed remarkable economic growth and their 1.5 billion citizens have seen their situation improve. During this time more than 100 countries have experienced economic declines and their nearly 2 billion citizens, almost half of whom are children and youth, have suffered through recessions, currency devaluations, and crushing international debt.

The world's poor often live in an unofficial shadow economy – estimated at \$US9 million – street vendors, day workers, unregistered businesses, illegal immigrants. This shadow economy is perhaps the rawest expression of capitalism existing on barter, bribes and illegal activities – barter, bribes, drugs, child labour sex trade, illegal arms trade – much of this is often unchallenged in this shadow economy.

2. The invisible poor and lost

What do I mean by this? Who are they and where are they? Certain statistics will tell us that about ¼ of the world's population have never heard the name of Jesus. Some will say they are hidden away in countries that perhaps seem impenetrable, distant, difficult to access. This may be so – all know of terrible human rights abuses that are hidden. The invisible poor and lost may also be our neighbours – literally – for example, the kidnapped girl in Austria.

3. Increasing internal violence and conflict

In 2000, 38 major conflicts and wars occurred around the world. Over 540m children estimated to live in unstable or violent contexts. More than 2m children died as a result of armed conflict in the 1990s and more than 6m were seriously injured or permanently disabled. Local warlords export natural resources to pay for their armies while turning more

than 300,000 children into soldiers (LRA) creating unbelievable trauma and huge numbers of internally displaced people.

4. People movements

The number of refugees has dramatically increased from 2.5m in 1975 to 15m in 2001. And then there are 22m internally displaced people due to civil war and economic collapse. The majority of these are women and children.

5. Towards 3 centres of economic power and the growing power of Asia

Asia, EU and USA will form the 3 centres of global economic power. China and India will also become major players on the world economic stage. What will this mean for the hegemony of the \$US, World Bank and IMF?

6. The marginalization of Africa

The West is becoming disheartened with Africa – “the hopeless Continent” with its seemingly intractable problems of uneven political leadership, wars, declining agricultural production, increasing population and of course HIV/AIDS. The disease is the continent’s biggest killer with approx 3m newly infected each year.

7. Polarization of power and shifting patterns of governance

Maybe what John Pilger calls “the new rulers of the world” (the multinationals). Global institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, the UN even and trans-national corporations may have more power or have more effect on people’s lives, especially the poor than their own governments. Ethnicity and religion can be manipulated to create local power. The poor are generally powerless in the face of all this.

8. The changing shape of the Christian church

Scholars such as Kwame Bediako and Andrew Walls have alerted us to the great phenomenon of the 20th century – that the centre of gravity of the church has shifted – south. More than 50% of Christians and 70% of evangelicals live in the Majority world. The church is more southern, aware of the supernatural and conservative theologically. It is also more holistic. Philip Jenkins says, “Soon, the phrase, ‘a white Christian’ may sound like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as ‘a Swedish Buddhist.’ Such people can exist, but a slight eccentricity is implied.” [1] Latin America has the largest number of Christians, Africa has the fastest growing church. In Europe the church is fast declining. However, this good news of amazing church growth in the last century is accompanied by profound contradictions. It has not been accompanied by widespread changes in social, economic and political behaviour reflecting the values of the reign of God. In fact we probably see more violence, poverty, injustice, materialism, immoral and unethical behaviour than ever. The crucial question for the church everywhere is, what kind of Christians are we making?

9. The emerging power and place of women

We know that women are linked to the good that social change produces. Female literacy correlates highly with reduced child mortality, lower fertility rates, improved nutrition, better children’s education and successful micro-enterprise. Among the poor, women do most of the work, produce the food and raise the children. However, there is an interesting irony when it comes to the girl child who still receives less education, less food and less health care than boys. In our world women are the poorest and the most oppressed by any

indicators; in terms of health, education, economics, abuse and violence - whether by individuals or by social structures. In every country of the world men earn more pay for less work. It is estimated that women do 62% of the world's work hours, yet own only 1% of the world's property. Women form 75 % of all sick people, 70% of all the poor, 66% of all illiterates and 80% of all refugees. Girls are still subject to harmful practices so if women are the key to transformation what are the implications of this?

10. The public health divide

The divide between rich and poor in terms of public health is stark. Infectious diseases kill more people every year than natural disasters. Since 1945 it is estimated that 150m people died from AIDS-related illnesses, TB and malaria in contrast to the 23m who died from wars over the same period. We know the catastrophic social impact that AIDS is having on countries within Africa especially. Market forces determine the manufacture of drugs – many pharmaceutical companies have limited their research into tropical diseases because of the high costs and low financial return.

11. Environmental limits

We are facing 3 parallel trends: falling water tables, shrinking cropland and levelling off of fish production from the oceans. Population growth is highest in the areas least able to meet the demand for food. Poverty leads to environmental degradation which in turn creates more poverty and can lead to increasing numbers of environmental refugees – estimated at 25m. Consumption patterns in the North make a far higher per capita impact on the environment than that of the rest of the world. A child born the industrialised world adds more to consumption and pollution over their lifetime than 30-50 children born in the Majority world. Of course, we are all very aware now of the awful implications of climate change and global warming. But how do we change our lifestyles to make a discernable difference?

12. Interfaith Issues

How do we relate to our neighbours from another faith – or no faith?? In a climate of fear, mistrust, inconvenience and pain (increased number of anti-Semitic attacks and violence against Muslims) – how do we respond as Christians?

13. Conclusion

So mission in the 21st century looks very different from preceding centuries. You can see from some of these trends that the world has changed dramatically. Perhaps the most significant change, as far as the church is concerned, is the shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian church towards the Global South. We are now living in a church which is predominantly female, poor and living in the Global South. This has huge ramifications for us in the Global North as to how we engage in mission e.g. whom do we send, where, how. It also means that we need to look at ourselves differently – we need to receive in mission and have the humility to listen and learn from the Global South. We, in the Anglican church, have also seen how the Anglican church in the Global South has different opinions and beliefs on certain issues that affect our Communion and our life together.

Another significant change which impacts UK has been migration and immigration and the kind of multi-cultural society we have now. What does this mean for the mission of the church here in UK? We may find that many of the migrants to UK are more 'spiritual' than the locals while at the same time many of our traditional churches are leaking members at a rapid rate.

Finally, globalisation, improved communications and cheaper travel means that we are familiar with all these trends in a new way. We hear of the latest disasters immediately, when

we travel we see differing standards of living and are often confronted with poverty and injustice literally in our faces, we experience the planet heating up so what does this mean for our daily discipleship as we follow Christ in this rapidly changing world? Perhaps this ease of communication does give us the opportunity of relating in new ways but perhaps also, the overwhelming nature of the problems of our planet cause us to retreat into our own corners, desperate for some respite. My hope is that we will continue to proclaim the good news, live with integrity as disciples of Jesus Christ, commit ourselves to show love and compassion, be involved in the struggle for a just society and care for our creation – all as we continue to engage with our ‘big issue.’

One version of the Big Issue (JI)

I have struggled to find a single word to sum up the situation we are facing. In the end I settled for ‘colonialism’; perhaps ‘imperialism’ might do. We think the age of colonialism is over, though the word ‘empire’ hasn’t gone out of fashion. George W. Bush and I both use it frequently! When I use the term ‘colonialism’ in my teaching I notice that the eyes of my students from the Global South light up. They know what I mean. The point about colonialism is that it creates a geography and ideology of centre and periphery that very much shape our world today. Let me illustrate. My daughter works with a mission outfit called ‘Servants to Asia’s Urban Poor’. What a great name! Except that we might substitute ‘the World’ for ‘Asia, it seems to me just about right. Jesus said that he was ‘among us as one that serves’ (Luke 22:27). It is Jesus the Servant who ‘brings forth justice’. Servants are the exact opposite of colonialists or imperialists. They are not at all the ones with the wealth, power and influence. ‘Urban’ is good because it is our actual context. Most of us live and work in cities. (More about that in a moment.) And then it is the poor to whom the good news is preached. What better place to start?

Let us look at *urban* mission. It is not, of course, that the countryside is all right. In fact one of the reasons why people are flocking into cities is to escape the crisis of the countryside. But I do believe that just at the moment cities deserve our special attention. They are, sociologically speaking, today’s ‘perfect storm’. ‘One billion people – or one in three urban residents – now live in an urban slum, the vast majority of them in developing nations’, writes Mark Kramer, in his recent book simply called *Dispossessed, Life in our World’s Urban Slums*. He adds, ‘At current rates, within a decade of this writing we’ll have more than twenty cities in the world with more than ten million inhabitants, most of them in poor nations. By the 2030s, the number of people living in informal settlements could double to about two billion, and we’ve yet to find some programmatic panacea for urban blight.’ Mike Davis, in his even more depressing book, *Planet of Slums* reckons that by 2015 there will be at least 550 cities with a population of more than a million. City population will be something like 10 billion by 2050. Most of these people will be living in slums and most of them will be in developing countries. [Clip of Kibera from ‘The Constant Gardner’]

The uncomfortable truth is that the modern megacity (and there are more and more of them, as we have seen) is what it is because it is a *colonial* space in nearly every aspect of its relationships. Historically, of course, many of the world’s great cities such as Kolkata and Mumbai in India or Shanghai and Hong Kong in China, or Nairobi in Kenya, were the direct product of colonialism. But it is more serious than that. Any Empire essentially operates as a metropolitan centre with a subservient, contributing periphery (colonies). So does the megacity. It has a metropolitan centre where power and wealth reside and a ‘colonial’ periphery which can be either the rural vicinity or its own slums or both. Actually, it has a third ‘periphery’, a pool of immigrant labour, people who come to work in the city on ‘colonial’ terms and who have been ‘produced’ by neo-colonialism and its unfair economic and trading arrangements.

[Karibu Mukholis]

If you take the two principles that we have been working with – firstly that justice means intervention on behalf of the ‘losers’ and secondly that the critical determinant of specific action is the context – then you have a working model for mission. I would only add that we need to look at this on a variety of scales. Justice in the story of the Good Samaritan was precisely to do with responding to the need of the man lying by the roadside. He required ‘intervention’ and the Jericho Road was the context – it set the agenda as they say. A modern example would be my missionary in the Delhi bus station. But at another level structural injustice requires structural intervention. There are ‘yokes of bondage’ which need smashing. It could be King Jehoiakim using forced labour as in Jeremiah 22 or it could be the generals in Myanmar who are currently using similar methods to build their country villas and golf courses. At a mega scale, Jesus attacked the purity code and the debt system of the Jewish Temple state which kept the rich rich and the poor poor; today it might be the unfair trading system which currently obtains between the West and the Global South and which has the same effect. Or, to put it slightly differently, one issue – street children for example – may have a number of levels. The child on the street whom I encounter every day on my way to the post office is one challenge. The police action against street children which may go so far as a ‘shoot on sight’ policy, would demand urgent action of another sort. An investigation as to *why* there are so many children on the streets would be a further, wider issue. All of these are *justice* issues in the Biblical sense. My own particular circumstances, my context, would determine which issue or issues I addressed.

Our response (CR)

What we need is the gift of sight. The gift of sight is a gift of the HS. Our eyes have to be opened to recognise JC, just as it was for those first disciples – over the dinner table, in the garden, on the lake, on the Damascus Rd. Once we can see JC, the HS enables us to see the other person. This is truly a gift of the HS. Unless we can see “the other” we will never be able to be authentically engaged in mission.

If we had been able to “see the other” might the genocide in Rwanda never have happened? If we were able “to see the other” might the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the civil war in N Ireland, the ignorance and apathy concerning Sudan and Congo, *apartheid* in South Africa, violence and oppression in Burma and Zimbabwe, tribalism, caste and class systems, oppressive colonialism – might all this have been avoided – if only we could see? Who are we blind to in our contexts, which prevents us from seeing the other person and, wittingly or unwittingly, means that we practise a theology of exclusion rather than of embrace? Might it be the older women in our congregations, who always faithfully provide the food, clean the church, arrange the flowers – have we ever taken the time to “see” them and to thank them? Might it be the young people whose music is so loud, whose language is incomprehensible, whose body-piercing and head shaving is so alien – have we ever stopped to look them in the eye, to appreciate their music, to consider the pressures they may be under – the bleak prospect of unemployment, broken homes, student loans, an uncertain future – have we ever stopped to look them in the eye and tried to understand them in their context? Might it be those theologically different from us whom we would criticize behind their backs rather than invite them into our homes to listen to them and “see” their point of view? Might it be those migrants who never learn our language, who never even try to integrate, who take over whole streets and suburbs in our cities – have we ever had them in our homes, offered them hospitality and tried to “see” their culture? In humility, let us ask ourselves whom the HS might be calling us “to see.”

And now let us turn to our neighbour to pray. Let us pray for two things – firstly that we may have the courage to face the ‘big issue’ in our context and secondly to ask God whom we need to “see” in our contexts.

In many instances, migration is a postcolonial phenomenon, which continues to link the colonising and colonised nations. The presence in Europe, for example, of people whose not-too-distant origins were in Africa or Asia or Latin America reflects the bonds (in more than one sense) created by the Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch and British empires. Difficult postcolonial issues such as multiculturalism (ethnic differences), language barriers, uneven development, inter-generational strife, identity crises and the like stem from this movement of peoples. In the same way Europe has become the testing ground for a number of new missiological issues such as monoethnic churches in a multiethnic society and witness to the gospel in a post Christian society (often by Christians who have no experience of a post Christian society!).

As a result, today we see societies which are ‘mixed-up’ in ways that are quite unique. Migration itself is not a recent phenomenon, of course. It has been going on for centuries. The United States, Australia, and Canada – just to make a selection – have experienced huge waves of immigration for two hundred years or more, indeed are nations largely made up of immigrants. But their initial approach, speaking generally, was to handle the situation by promoting a sense of new-found oneness among their people. They were greatly aided in this by the way that immigrants were able to forge a new life for themselves without the presence of a settled population. (Sometimes the land was genuinely unoccupied, sometimes the original inhabitants were eliminated.) Immigrants today, however, encounter centuries’ old civilisations and even more importantly, they remain the minority. On the whole, too, they form a diaspora, that is to say that retain strong links with their place of origin. (See below.) Another difference might be the relative isolation of past generations of immigrants. The original settlers of countries like the US and Australia had little opportunity to return to their homeland, even if they had wanted to. Partly this had to do with the fact that they were often escaping from the old to the new, and partly because transport systems were comparatively slower and more expensive – return to the homeland and regular visits were not easy to manage for people who had ‘sold up’ to make the move in the first place. I suspect that the vast majority of immigrants nowadays can afford the (relatively cheap) air fares to visit friends and relatives at home. People are ‘on the move’ more than ever before today and in all directions.

Globalisation – people on the move

Postcolonialism links with globalisation. The global culture demands and then favours those who are prepared to be mobile or at least to plug into the communications revolution at some level. By one description most people in the affluent world are economic migrants. Very few people stay at home when it comes to finding a job. The difference is that globalisation has made it both easier and (often) more necessary to make that move. Not equally easy, however. Unequal development within globalisation means job mobility and open frontiers for some, but forced migration and hostile frontiers for others. (Postcolonial migrants, for example, are more often in this second category.) ‘Economic migrants’ is a loaded term, nowadays, because they come in a number of varieties. They may be people who simply want to earn a better living, and have marketable skills for which they can get a better price away from home. Then there are those who need to make new arrangements for their families as a matter of survival. They simply cannot provide for their own by staying at home. Globalisation in its revolutionary communications mode has made these movements possible where they have not always been an option before. Also, sometimes global economics are the cause of this process. The way in which multi-nationals can now choose where their manufacturing and service base is, means that for many people the work which was

traditionally associated with their locality has gone elsewhere and they simply have to travel away from home in order to move to a new job. (All this does not take into account the refugees from war and from religious and political persecution.)

Diaspora

The name 'diaspora' may have behind it the simple idea of dispersion, but it has now become something of a technical term, with a number of features. First of all, it involves a dispersion from one place or 'centre' from which all the dispersed take their identity, though there can be a variety of foreign destinations. All share in a common memory or myth of this 'homeland' (even if they are born somewhere else!), something which is so important that there is no likelihood that it will be forgotten. The fact that they remain 'strangers', a perpetual minority in their host nation, keeps the myth alive. If, by chance they are assimilated to such an extent that they disown or forget their place of origin, to that extent they are ceasing to be part of the diaspora. Many hope to return to their homeland, and even if this is not the long term plan they are often keen to visit from time to time if they are able to do so. They are also often very willing to take part in enterprises that benefit their homeland, whether this is to their individual advantage or not. All this means that the ongoing connections with their homeland are an important aspect of their self-identity.

Typically, diaspora communities are both needy and open. Many diaspora communities give the impression that they are doing very well! People who leave their own countries to work somewhere else (if it is voluntary) are often the most go-ahead and successful. Think of the way that members of the Indian diaspora have prospered in areas such as business and information technology. But the reverse is also true. Immigrant communities often fall behind in terms of education, securing jobs and business success. Natural disadvantages to do with language and culture (I mean that they are different from those of the majority) hold them back. So do the prejudices of the host nation. Some are lonely and isolated. They need help to cope with a challenging new situation. The openness of diaspora communities is also an ambiguous concept. Often the sense that they are being discriminated against, the feeling that they are in a foreign land, the all-prevailing newness of their situation leads to a very understandable 'closed' or defensive mentality. There is evidence, for example, that diaspora communities are more likely to emphasise their religious commitments – if they are different from those of the host population – than they did back at home. Being religious is now part of their identity that they need to emphasise if that identity is going to survive. (In this respect Christians who are concerned about the growing militancy of Muslims in the West should remember Aesop's fable about the wind and the sun. The contest was about who could get a man to remove his cloak. The more the wind blew the more the man clutched his cloak around him. However, when the sun shone he took it off!) On the other hand people do 'open up' when they are in new circumstances. They try new things. The fact that they are not being observed by what was likely a close knit community at home frees them up to do this. When moving to a new place they expect it to be different and expect to have to adapt to it. Some of the new arrangements suit them better than the old ones.

Mission

There are a number of missiological conclusions that we need to come to here. It is fair to assume that needy people are the church's opportunity, and that it is neither exploitive nor patronising to offer people friendship and help in these circumstances. Moving into a new culture, far away from familiar friends and family, can be a difficult process, and leaving people just to 'get on with it' is certainly not an appropriate response. Diaspora communities can live with a constant sense of being under threat, and Christians in their dealings with threatened minorities have a responsibility to do everything they can to alleviate that sense of

threat, whatever its source. On the other hand diaspora people are usually hoping for something new. They have not come such a long distance only to remain the same people that they were before. In a very profound way the gospel offers people a new start, and maybe that is the newness they have been looking for all their lives.

Among Christians in particular it is unacceptable that people arriving as guests should end up in exclusive ethnic groups – even if this is in the name of dynamic evangelistic methods! I am not in favour of homogenous churches, for example. The cutting edge of evangelism in any church may have to have a cultural element in it – young people evangelising young people, employing someone from an ethnic minority group as an evangelist to reach his or her fellows and so on – but one of the essential witnesses of the gospel is still that we are all ‘one in Christ Jesus’ and that as far as ‘the world’ is concerned we are all aliens and there is every reason for us to stick together.

Diaspora people are often keen to do something for their home country. This can have missiological significance, too. The organisation South Asian Concern is a good example here. Its ‘concern’ is primarily for the Asian diaspora in the UK, but Asian diaspora Christians are also warmly encouraged to take responsibility for the South Asian sub-continent and its need of the gospel. Notice that it is in a good position to do so. Because a diaspora never loses contact with ‘home’, because of the network effect, there is constant traffic between those at home and those in exile, so to speak. The gospel can be part of that traffic. This is one of the great joys of the postcolonial situation. Postcolonialism reminds us that we are living in a world that has been profoundly shaped by the colonial experience. There are so many bad outcomes of that, it becomes a dispiriting task to catalogue them. Yet the continued connection between, say, Britain and India seems, from the point of view of the gospel, an example of redemption. Not that it excuses the history of British imperialism, but it takes something which had much that was evil and exploitive and uses it for blessing – a process at which, if the irreverence may be pardoned, God is very good.

Footnotes

[1] P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), p.3.

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