

BACKGROUND – mission in times of CULTURAL CHANGE

If someone were to ask you the question posed in Psalm 137:4, 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' the first response might be to state the obvious, that in our lifetime something major has happened in Western culture – the times they are a 'changing! - and we find ourselves as Christians almost feeling exilic in nature, aliens and strangers in a world that no longer feels as familiar.

We know that in previous generation's cultural change was often a slow process, with only minor adjustments to social habits and ways of thinking being made.

Now, change is neither subtle nor gradual but traumatic and immediate, seemingly unpredictable and random, and for that reason, impossible to plan or control.

Somehow I feel that we need a new map for communities and geography we inhabit.

Consumerism has become the religion of the 21st century, combining as it does materialism, hedonism and individualism. It's 'The chief rival to God in our culture 'writes Alan Storkey. 'It has its own evangelism budget called advertising and 'choice 'as its core value, which is why shopping is a picture of post-modern life.'

Ivan Illich was once asked 'What is the most revolutionary way to change society? Is it violent revolution or is it gradual reform? 'He gave a careful answer: 'Neither, if you want to change, you need an alternative story.'

Maybe our message now must be forwarded to a new addresses because those we wish to share it with are often now inhabiting different places. "New forms of church are a "return to sender": a rediscovery of the original Jesus story for each time, with diverse people in every place" wrote.

~Helmut Theilike.

We need need to find out where people now gather otherwise we will be knocking on the wrong doors. People today seem to be in fear to go outside the boxes they create in their minds, and within their own 'castles', and we have to help them to risk, to journey, and to discover life. How?

We don't change the story only it's setting. It's like a remake of a film; same story but b/w has become colour, the background, language, imagery and special effects reflect the changes since it was 1st made –its same story, but in an up-to-date setting.

But how to tell an alternative story?

I suggest by firstly living the questions not insisting on answers. It is to acknowledge as Rowan Williams wrote that 'Christ indeed answers our questions but he also questions our answers'. Not just living with the questions in terms of resignation to the way things are but living the questions themselves as a platform for experimentation and re-imagining so as to contribute to what can be.

'Jesus calls us, not to a new religion but to life' writes Richard Rohr. I feel that those I come into contact with no longer want or need a faith that binds by superstition, rules and regulations. For people seek to live in the freedom of faith – free to be who I are.

Secondly I suggest that we need to recognise and emphasise the differences between dogmatism and faith. Surely the only way forward for us is to dialogue with God, listen to others who differ from us, and seek to understand other viewpoints which help us discern what is true. It is living 'a Generous Orthodoxy' to quote Brian McLaren. 'It is being open to providing halfway houses for those who are Disillusioned followers, reflective exiles, transitional explorers, integrated wayfinders.' to quote the categories of NZ writer Alan Jamison in his book Exiles. Dogmatism is like stone whereas faith is like soil. Dogmatism is closed, defensive, stereotyped and polarises. Faith is open, resilient, diverse and teachable, stimulating understanding and tolerance. Dogmatism insists on propositions and doctrine, faith knows and follows Jesus.

Then I suggest that we need to be willing to share our own stories. Life is being part of a story still being told, chapters yet to be written, a participative narrative. We need to tell our own unique stories: unedited, unsanitised, rough and ready, not squeezed into some kind of formula. Our doubts, fears, problems, embarrassments, and confessions can all have apologetic and pastoral value in a post-modern world. They illustrate 'truth' in its post-modern form of honesty, integrity, authenticity, transparency.

We are all on a journey in a foreign land, living on the margins.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? 'A quote I remember, but not the writer, wrote that 'The only way to justify the claims of the gospel is by living the way of life to which the gospel calls us'.

In living this fresh expression, it is our prayer that in the goodness and grace of God we will be part of the 'enacting a fearful hope for society'. As the people of God we are 'Blessed to be a blessing'.

In order to live faithfully in this changing and fragmented world, we have to be willing to explore the new terrain, which now needs a 4x4 flexible, adaptable vehicle.

It's no longer a simple, straight road from A to B. In accepting the need to understand and engage with the changing culture we risk misunderstanding, even dare I say it - the charge of heresy - in order to obey the gospel 'imperative' of seeking God as Person, a subject to be known and loved in relationship, rather than as Doctrine and Dogma, an object to be analysed and known about, which limits God to our own understanding of 'truth'.

Choice lies at the centre of consumerism, 'we are what we buy' 'what's in it for me? = pleasure, self-indulgence. The way people think about shopping is the way people think about truth. Truth is a commodity, so they can 'buy into' that belief and put it into the shopping trolley along with other superstitions etc. A choice to follow Jesus now has become such a choice, but it goes against the tide of the general pattern of life and thought today. It's no longer the status quo! We are a people living on the margins and exploring ways of engaging with those seeking something that meets their spiritual searching. Sadly they rarely seek the church as a way of meeting that need. We have somehow lost something of the mystery and spirituality that identifies church as a source of their searching.

It is this context that make it important to 'explore new ways of being church' and to keep living the question 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'. In this quest we should also be committed to not being afraid to listen, or to ask questions, or to be converted to truth in whatever form and from whomever if may be presented.'

It seems to me that the former Archbishop Ramsay spoke words of wisdom when when he stated that he 'wished to understand and even learn from theological views which were not his own, while at the same time commending a generous and tolerant orthodoxy. 'We want to retain an evangelical openness – to have strong convictions without turning them into arrogant certainties that polarise and stereotype.

'We can do worse than remember a principle, from the writings of H Butterfield in his book Christianity and History. which gives us a firm Rock and leaves the maximum elasticity for our minds: the principle – "Hold to Christ and for the rest be totally uncommitted."

In read a view that stated 'when a culture is changing, those who are willing to embrace the new culture are those willing to be insecure. When the culture is changing, the new culture is shaped by those who are willing to be insecure.

Finally, Helmut Thielicke wrote that "A person who is prepared to speak into this hour's need will always be skirting the edge of heresy, but only the person who risks these heresies can gain the truth."

Let me pray

Lord wake us up to what needs doing,

And what needs undoing.

Wake us up to what must be let go,

And what to draw closer.

Wake us up to what enlarges love,

And what diminishes it.

In all parts of our lives,

Disturb us and wake us up.

Rev Duncan MacLean - April 22nd 2023

(With apologies to any who I have misquoted, or fail to quote entirely amongst my text!)