

EVANGELISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Isaiah 49: 1-7; John 1: 29-42; Psalm 40; 1 Cor 1: 1-9

How many years ago was it? Seven or eight hundred years before the time of Jesus, the prophet of Isaiah Chapter 49 recorded a vision of God calling the nation of Israel to be a light to all nations so that God's salvation might reach to the end of the earth. At that moment the project of world wide evangelisation was formed. After the time of Jesus, Christians took up that mission, believing that they were the true Israel and that Jesus their Lord was as John's gospel says, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Christians took up the light of the world with great conviction and determination that it should be the light of the whole world. Over the centuries of Christian history the light was offered to people of every nation on earth. Many people received it and were enlightened by it. A fellowship of the followers of Jesus was established that reached around the whole world. The Bible was translated into hundreds of languages so that people might read for themselves about Jesus. Many, many lives have been changed by the gospel of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. The prophet of Isaiah 49 would be amazed to see how the vision of universal knowledge of God's salvation has been realized.

The prophet would also be appalled at what has been done in the name of spreading the gospel to all nations.

The light of the world has been held aloft like a torch to guide armies of invaders and exploiters. The light has been used to ignite bonfires of inquisition and pogroms of persecution. It has been thrust into the faces of indigenous peoples to burn out their visions of mystery and stifle their speaking of Spirit. The light of the world has been darkness for Jews who have suffered immensely at the hands of Christians. It has been darkness for aboriginal peoples the world over who have lost their ancient traditions to Christian imperialism. The light of the world has been darkness for numberless women who have been oppressed by the prevailing power of patriarchy established and justified by religious arguments. Many of the worst outrages in human history have been committed with the active participation and support of Christian religious leaders. The genocidal activities of the Christian Orthodox Serbians and the Roman Catholic Croatians are only the latest in the long, long story of Christian intolerance, prejudice, arrogance, fanaticism and violence, justified always by the claim to be God's agents of salvation for the whole world. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 6:22, Jesus said: If the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness.

It is such an incredibly painful and horrible story that it is no wonder Christians have repressed and suppressed the history of our violent imperialism, our

outrageous anti-Semitism and the sexism, racism, homophobia and classism that were fueled by religious rationalizations.

we have now to add: Is it possible to take up the great commission of evangelization of the whole world without continuing to add to the dark history of religious oppression? I believe that it is, but only on condition that certain principles are followed. We certainly cannot go on with a "business as usual" attitude assuming that our imperialism and intolerance is somehow blessed by God. We also cannot give up the responsibility for sharing the knowledge of God that we have learned in Jesus Christ and in the prophets of Israel.

Like the Psalmist we heard today in Psalm 40 we too must be able to say:

I have told the glad news of deliverance
I have not restrained my lips
I have not hidden your caring help
I have not concealed your steadfast love
and faithfulness.

What then are some of the principles of combining evangelism with appropriate respect for people of other faiths and ideologies or people of no confessed beliefs?

The first principle, I believe, is that we must be as true as possible to the historical, biblical Jesus. Jesus was not imperialistic or oppressive. Christian evangelism has gone wrong when it has forgotten or never found out what Jesus was really like. For example, it is often forgotten

that Jesus risked his life to teach that God is God of the whole world. In his first sermon in his home town of Nazareth when people were expecting to receive great benefits from God as God's chosen people Jesus reminded them that there were many widows in Israel at the time of Elijah but God through Elijah helped the widow of Sidon who was not in Israel at all and there were many lepers in Israel at the time of Elisha, but God healed Naaman the Syrian - and the Syrians were (and still are) Israel's worst enemies. For this vision of God, the people of Nazareth tried to throw Jesus over the cliff at the edge of town.

Another time, Jesus told Nicodemus that the Spirit of God blows where it wills and no one knows where it comes from or where it will go. We dare not, therefore, claim that the Spirit of God only blows among Christians or that only Christians are "born from above" by the Spirit. Jesus explicitly denied that belief.

In our evangelism we must be true to the Jesus who showed respect to foreigners, outcasts, prostitutes and sinners. We must truly follow the teaching of Jesus who spoke most frequently about the Reign of God that includes all creation, all peoples and all creatures including the sparrows and the lilies. The Reign of God, Jesus said, is the good news that needs to be told. It is a Kingdom for children and all the oppressed. It is a reign of peace with justice. It is the hope of the world and it does not belong to any one group of religious people. Jesus spoke fiercely

(quote)

against those who "traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte and when he becomes a proselyte you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." (Matthew 23: 15)

If we are to continue in evangelism we must be true to the One who taught that the law of God can be summed up in the Commandments to love God wholeheartedly and to love one's neighbour as oneself. The same Jesus illustrated loving your neighbour with a story in which the truly neighbourly person was a foreigner, a Samaritan, a member of a despised group of "unbelievers."

It is a supreme and tragic irony that the followers of this Jesus have failed so often to have the kind of respect for others that Jesus had. If evangelism is to be carried on at all after its terrible history it can only be done by Christians being as true as possible to the way Jesus himself was and being true to what he taught and thought about God.

A Second principle, I believe,
It follows from this first principle of Christian witness, that dialogue must replace proclamation as the main method of evangelism.

Proclamation has a heroic, noble ring to it - creating a picture of someone telling out the truth regardless of the consequences. There may be times and places when proclamations have to be made. But the problem with proclamation is that it is a one-way communication. It is not a relationship of mutuality or respect for the God-given

insights of others. It does not respect the findings or feelings of others: ^{Elm 109} it simply pro-claims its own message.

Paul Tillich, one of the greatest theologians of this century said that the message of Christ is too often thrown at peoples' heads like a stone whereas it should always be heard as the answer to their deepest questions.

Dialogue is a process of questioning and answering, of listening and telling. Dialogue cannot happen without both parties having respect for the experience and thinking of the others.

So evangelism, if it is to continue, must observe the principles of dialogue. There should be very little Christian telling without Christian listening. This will not water down the Christian faith or make Christians wishy washy. It will simply be a means whereby the Christian medium of evangelism will be consistent with the Christian message about love and truth. If the medium of evangelism belies the message as it so often has done then the gospel is not heard at all. *It becomes like sounding brass or tinkling cymbal*

A third principle of Christians relating to people of other faith or no specific faith is that Christians must critically reconstruct any beliefs or doctrines which denigrate or put down people of other beliefs or ideologies. We must change the doctrines which do not reflect appropriate respect for other human beings or for God's freedom to relate to others besides us.

An example of a doctrine which must be changed is the ancient Christian claim that there is no salvation outside the church. (Extra ecclesiam nulla salus). At the second Vatican Council called by Pope John 23 in the 1960's the Roman Catholic Church explicitly rejected this ancient doctrine of "no salvation outside the church." Many other Christians, however, have not given up the claim to exclusive access to God's saving power.

There are other doctrines which similarly need revision. It is an ongoing task for the church to work on. This task is an implication of the first principle of Christian life--namely that our doctrines as well as our practices should be as true as possible to the thought and practice of Jesus himself.

There ^{no doubt are} ~~may be~~ many more principles to discover as we explore a basically different orientation for Christian evangelism. We are at the beginning of a new journey of faith as we try to work out the ways to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ and to relate as we should in love and respect to our neighbours in a shrinking global community.

In the gospel lesson today we heard the story of St. Andrew discovering Jesus and then bringing his brother, Simon Peter to meet Jesus. Andrew and another disciple heard John the Baptist say that Jesus was someone very special. ^{in his eyes} They saw Jesus passing by and approached him to ask where he was staying. In other words they asked if they might go and talk with him. He invited them to do just

that. The story illustrates the fact that people need to have dialogue before they are convinced of anything that is especially important to them. People need to ask questions and make their own observations, tell about their own experiences and draw their own conclusions. Andrew subsequently brought Peter to Jesus to see and hear for himself, too.

Evangelism by a method of dialogue promises to be more effective than the old method of proclaiming authoritative doctrine and insisting on exclusive access to God. The gospel writers today took the trouble to tell of the way the first disciples Andrew and Peter and others were introduced to the gospel. We may ^{of Jesus Christ perhaps} conclude that if dialogue with and ^{Jesus} about Jesus was effective ^{for the 1st disciples} with them it may be good enough for us to use today.

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