

God in your grace, use us to transform your world

Drawing on words taken from the ‘theme’ of the recent WCC Assembly held in Brazil, Father Keerthisiri Fernando, an Anglican priest from Sri Lanka, shares with us briefly an experience from the context of his own ministry in South Asia.

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The following short study is based on Luke 10.25-37 – The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus narrated this parable as an answer to a question asked by an expert in the law. Here the question was, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ Although in this discussion both Jesus and the expert in the law accepted that to inherit eternal life it was necessary to love God with our whole heart, soul, strength and mind, neither of them was interested in having a dialogue on ‘who is my God’. Instead the expert in the law was interested to know who was his neighbour.

Jesus told this story not as a fairytale but took the material from real life situations of his time. During this time it was dangerous to travel from Jerusalem to Jericho. This road was frequented by looters and robbers. It is clear that to compile this story Jesus chose the personalities very carefully. The characters (the man who was attacked by the robbers, a Samaritan, a priest and a Levite) were active, influential and at times problematic types of figures of that time.

When the Samaritan decided to help the fallen man he had to cross his ethnic and religious boundaries. On the other hand in order to stand on his feet once again, the fallen man had to rely on a person who was not of his own group but from a hated group. He had to acknowledge the goodness and the kindness of the Samaritan. Without any doubt the fallen man was forced to compare and contrast the unwillingness of two people from his own group with the willingness of the Samaritan to help him when he needed support.

Cross boundaries in Badulla

Let me tell you one of my experiences in Badulla (Sri Lanka) in 1989, right at the beginning of my ministry as an assistant curate.

As the general hospital of Badulla was very close to where I lived and worked I often had to visit patients from in and around Badulla who stayed in the hospital for treatment. One day I met a young Buddhist monk who wanted to discuss a few matters about my ministry in the hospital. After the discussion he said that he was hoping to start a similar ministry for the Buddhist patients in the hospital. For this he got the support of a few medical doctors in the hospital. At the inauguration ceremony of his ministry at the hospital he invited me to say a few words emphasising the necessity of a ministry of this nature from my own experience. Although at the beginning I was hesitant to say a few words at the inauguration, finally I agreed and said a few words from my own experience. After the ceremony many distinguished guests who were present came to me, appreciating what I said and requesting me to help that Buddhist monk to perform his ministry effectively.

Gradually the Buddhist monk and I became good friends, and whenever there were Buddhist patients who needed help I informed the monk and the monk in turn

sent a message when there were Christians who wanted the services of a clergy person.

After some time that Buddhist monk came to my place one day and said that some people in the area were trying to stop his ministry at the hospital. He asked me whether I could help him. Then I told him that I was not a powerful person who could help him to resolve this matter. It was his view that if I could explain to the people about the ministry that he was exercising in the hospital that itself would be sufficient to prevent him being removed from his hospital ministry. I agreed to tell anybody who wanted to know what I observed that monk doing in the hospital. Later I got to know that because of my intervention he was allowed to continue his ministry in the hospital.

This made me realise the necessity of crossing one's own ethnic and/or religious boundaries to serve humanity. According to my understanding this is one of the main messages that Jesus wanted to underline by narrating the story of the Good Samaritan.

In Sri Lanka today?

In our present context this is something that we urgently need to promote if we are to enjoy lasting peace in Sri Lanka. The only effective way to reduce the prejudices of the other group is to get into the other group to help them, and we do this by crossing the narrow ethno-religious identities of my own group. This is not easy because whenever anybody try to do this s/he could be suspected by both groups.

But this is the cost of our discipleship. This is where we meet the cross. Jesus crossed his narrow ethno-religious boundaries to redeem and transform the world. When Jesus crossed his ethno-religious boundaries the leaders of his nation and some of his people found it difficult to understand him. Since the Roman imperial government also did not recognise what he was doing, the Jewish leaders were therefore able to use the Roman imperial power to crucify him.

If we ask God to use us to transform our world we cannot avoid this cross. But that's where we find redemption and liberation. This model is not something of the past. This is what Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa did to transform South Africa into a country where blacks and whites have equal rights. Another example for this model is Martin Luther King of the United States of America. Where Asia is concerned I believe we could draw better inspiration from the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi of India. His struggle was very much related to ethno-religious identities and drew inspiration from religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity.

Suggestions for action

1. Identify three passages where Jesus crossed his own boundaries, and have a discussion to understand the reasons for him doing so.
2. Identify three opportunities where we could cross our narrow ethno-religious boundaries to serve humanity.
3. Select one of those opportunities and work out a programme with another group – Example: To have a programme with another ethno-religious group.
4. Share the responsibilities to carry out that programme with deadlines.

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