

Mission and Power

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Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.

Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

(Gospel of John ch.11 vv.43-44)

I am starting with this story because for me, it is a powerful story which helps us understand the Australian Aboriginal context, indeed the context for Indigenous peoples around the world. The raising of Lazarus speaks to me of a powerful challenge to all of us to share fresh possibilities of new life with their Indigenous brothers and sisters.

Like Lazarus, too many Aboriginal people are “entombed”. They are entombed by poverty; by violence; by the effects of colonization; the legacy of missionaries; by exclusion; by racism; by more than 200 years of having land taken and culture trampled and by policies and practices from Governments, Churches and others which are designed literally, and metaphorically, to keep us bound and hidden, out of sight, behind the tomb stone.

Indigenous peoples around the world, despite our different cultures, languages and contexts have many of these issues in common. As we talk about mission and power, a key question we must ask is how do we, as Churches and as individuals, go about the necessary work of setting free our Indigenous sisters and brothers from the yoke of imperialism and colonialism? And what are we, Indigenous peoples, doing to set ourselves and our non-Indigenous brothers and sisters free from the yoke of imperialism and colonialism? For when one suffers from the effects of these twin 'isms' we all suffer, as individuals and as a nation.

That is not to say that we must all become one people, we must understand and appreciate our differences but also work together to bring greater understanding and reconciliation. I am reminded of a story told by highly respected Aboriginal, Pastor George Rosendale, about two well known Australian birds, the black and white cockatoos.

They were brothers. One day the white cockatoo found the black cockatoo sitting under a shady tree looking angry and upset.

'What is wrong, brother?' 'I'm angry with dad because he made me black. Why didn't he make me like you? I'm going to change myself'. He went to his uncle's country and asked him for honey and clay. 'Get as much as you want, there's plenty there'.

He got the clay and honey and went back home. He powdered the clay and rubbed honey all over himself and put the powdered clay on. He looked at himself and said, 'Now I look like my brother'. His grandpa got so angry with him that he called on the monsoon to bring rain. It washed all the clay off him.

This story reminds us that we must be who we were meant to be, we must be in touch with our God given essence, it is no good trying to be something else and it is no good trying to make people into something else. We were created as unique and very special people and we must be true to that. There is nothing wrong with difference; each of us brings unique gifts to our life and our ministries.

It is useful to be mindful of how we can work together as different peoples as we consider the call of Jesus to bring good news to the poor and to set captives free and to recover sight. He said to us:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people. Luke 3: v.18-19

Is this not the essence of Jesus' mission? It is no coincidence that these words were Jesus' first words. They were words that guided him throughout his life. If you look at his life; he challenges the Pharisees and lawmen; he hung out with the sinners and spent his life healing those who were mentally, spiritually and physically sick. It says to us that we are to allow these people to be free from the things that bind them.

As Indigenous Christians we look to our Churches to walk with us as we throw off those things that oppress us. But often, we encounter imperialism and colonialism there too. It is not always our experience that Churches are truly opening eyes and hearts to Indigenous cultures and peoples.

Last year, we held an Indigenous Theology conference in Australia, during which we took some time to look at the experiences the participants had of mission. It was an interesting exercise. Some of the participants were non-Indigenous people who had been, or still are, missionaries. Other participants were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who had been raised on missions or who were Stolen Generations (that is forcibly taken from their families), or who had been educated by the Church. Many of the comments and stories we heard recognised the complexity of the mission experience. They recognised that missions saved many lives. They were places of protection from atrocities being perpetrated against Aboriginal people at the time. Other experiences were negative and the pain and hurt is still palpable. Hurt from being taken away from home; being treated as unpaid labour; being cut off from family and culture. While some missionaries educated and trained and were good Christian role models; many also perpetuated harsh, racist policies. Some abused the people entrusted into their care and their actions were far removed from those principles they preached. These are the legacies we bring into our interactions and relationships today. And these are the things we must acknowledge and address if we are to truly roll back that stone, unbind ourselves and set ourselves free.

So what can we do?

Time does not allow a full presentation of what we can do. But there are two things that I think are of the utmost importance. First, we need to empower the local Indigenous church to live the life that Christ has called them to. But Indigenous Church needs support; don't presuppose that they can do it themselves without proper support and resources.

Second, and this is also related to the kind of support that Indigenous Church needs, we need to remember that the "White Western European Church" does not have all the answers and is not the only way to experience and live church. In the Australian context we need to explore and understand more about what an "Australian Church" looks like and to do that we can learn a lot from Indigenous peoples. As one of our Aboriginal church leaders, Bishop James Leftwich, often says: Indigenous peoples were once missioned to, now we are part of the mission force. We are equal partners in the creation of the community of church of the future. We need the mainstream church to listen - not to impose; to learn - not to dictate. Open your hearts and minds to what Indigenous peoples offer and then we can walk together to live the life that Christ has called each and every one of us.