

Chapter 14

Vulnerability = Opportunity *-The Little Brothers of Jesus -*

Although I have given the best years of my life to the a missionary vocation, I sometimes have a rather ambiguous love, hate relationship with the whole concept of missionary work. Our best intentions can be thwarted by ethnocentric pride, and history has offered the opportunity to deflect and distort the meaning of missionary work in every age.

A Catholic missionary, Vincent Donovan, shared some insights about the origins of mission in East Africa. They were confronted with the problem of slavery. Before slavery, the indigenous people had an orderly, fairly stable way of life. Slavery brought havoc, confusion and misery unimaginable. Donovan continues in his own words:

*"The Arab raiders went far inland to get their slaves and they drove them back to the coast toward Zanzibar. The last stop on the mainland was **Bagamoyo**.*

*It is said that Bagamoyo takes its name from the two Swahili words, **bwaga** and **moyo**. Bwaga means "to throw down", or "put down", or "let down". In a long safari, the one leading the safari, at different points, would yell to the porters, "Bwaga mizigo," "put down your loads." Moyo means "heart". Bwaga moyo would thus mean, "**Put down your heart.**" Bagamoyo was the place where the captured slave, after his long trip from the interior, would put down his heart, lay down the burden of his heart, give up hope – because it was his last contact with his own country before the trip to Zanzibar and a life of misery."*

The first missionaries who arrived on the scene were full of good intentions to do something about this dreadful enslavement of a people. They did what they thought was best and decided to buy slaves themselves.

*"They bought them left and right, with all the money they could get their hands on. They bought them by the hundreds and by the thousands – and they christianised all they bought. **Buying slaves and christianising them became, in fact, the principal method of the apostolate not only in East Africa, but on the entire continent.**"*

Money was obviously the key element in this enterprise and it was amply supplied from Rome for the Catholics, and from "mission societies" for the Protestants. Antislavery movements in both Britain and America also pulled on the heartstrings of those "back home" to help finance this "vital" mission work to the poor slaves. The missionaries were, in good conscience, fighting the system of slavery. But in looking back, one wonders if the best way to fight a system was to buy the products of that system.

"The missionaries bought those slaves, took care of them and fed them by means of huge farms and plantations, run by the ex-slaves themselves. One would feel reassured if the missionary journals of that time showed evidence that the lot of the ex-slaves was noticeably better than that of their slave counterparts on Zanzibar or elsewhere. Physical cruelty, of course, was never part of the mission compound regime. But the word "free" might not be the most accurate word to describe life on the mission plantations. And even for that freedom, such as it was, there was a price to be paid – acceptance of the Christian religion."

Donovan's account confronts us with hard questions that will not just disappear. One wonders how many missionaries of the time questioned the wisdom of what they were doing. In effect their enterprise was sheer madness. They were trying to build the church in the most artificial way imaginable.

"Following baptism of these ex-slaves, and the training of many of them in the work-shop schools, the mission arranged marriages among them, hoping to settle them as Christian families and villages on some part of the vast "mission compound."

The hope was that such families would "multiply" and end up filling a whole continent with Christians. Unfortunately the offspring of such slave families dwindled, and the idea proved to be a dismal failure.

*"But perhaps more serious in the long run – this early missionary effort in East Africa has left its subtle mark, **the mark of slavery, on all succeeding generations of missionary work.** The mission compounds are still in evidence in East Africa. And the questionable motivation for baptism, the subservience and **dependence of the christianised peoples**, the condescension of the missionaries, are themes that have returned again and again in the intervening years. **And the distortion as to the purpose and meaning and methods of missionary work has taken us far from the true centre.**"*

The folly of best intentions going tragically wrong. So many suffered and laboured, trapped in a distorted paradigm of missionary work, which was far from the true centre of a "vulnerable" Christ.

"Bagamoyo stands like a ghost town today, with its huge and empty cathedral, its slave blockhouse, its tall coconut trees with their branches hardly stirring in the stupefying heat, and its melancholy graveyard filled with the remains of so many young missionaries, with the sleep of a century upon them."

Bagamoyo indeed – "leave here your heart and hopes," a fitting symbol for the thousands of slaves, the many missionaries, and a half-century of missionary work in Africa."

Donovan, agonisingly reflects on the failures of mission, looking at education, the political and geographical influences of colonialism, and independence.

"There is no mistaking the fact that missionary work is in a shambles. Born in slavery, disorientated by the school system, startled by independence, and smothered in nation building – mission in East Africa has never had the chance to be true to itself."

He may sometimes seem to overstate the negatives, but his quest is to find reality and a suitable paradigm for effective missions today. In the end, Donovan himself decided to "become vulnerable", stripping off the security of the mission base and finance. He became a vulnerable traveller amongst the Masai people, humbly exposing Christ to them in their culture and language.

"Who is the Christ I preach ? What is the unique contribution of Christianity when all the cultural accretions of Western civilisation have been pared away ?"

He incarnated the difficult answer to these questions as he dwelt among the Masai. Each one of us, especially those with a heart for mission, must have the courage to face up to the challenge of these questions. My own quest for reality has led me to try and find some answers, not in East Africa, but Central Africa, which has the same chequered past concerning mission structures. This chapter attempts to challenge some of the more established ideas of mission work, and introduces the idea of "vulnerability" as being a key paradigm for mission strategy. Donovan left us to do an apprenticeship with the Masai people, I'm introducing you to my own apprenticeship with the Pygmies.

A few years ago I was travelling in the back of an old Landrover towards Scieplac in the Central African Republic on my first visit to a Pygmy (1) encampment. The road was bumpy, I was hot and sticky and deep in thought about the challenge of raising new missionary armies from the various African tribes.

"Is it really possible Lord ?"

In the West we have so much. We learn from birth to look after ourselves, to be strong and independent. We are taught to seek good food, clothing and shelter, good medical care, stable family life, good education for the children, decent means of transport and communication, and a stable secure environment in which to live. Having been saturated in these values it is no surprise that the Church in the West, albeit it in a very balanced "Christian" way, also models these basic lifestyle values.

Most missionaries I have met, who have been sent out from such Western churches, also model the same values on their field of service. I must say here that I have no intention of criticising or judging such missionaries who are often living quite sacrificially compared to a potential lifestyle in the West. In most cases however they still need to be maintained in a way that reflects to some degree the values they have grown up with. The missionary lifestyle which is modelled is often one of a very capable

(bible school or graduate education), quite self sufficient individual. Most probably he will need a decent vehicle to travel in Africa, a reasonable house to live in and the facilities to communicate to the outside world. In most cases, he may well be receiving his support by donations from a home church or foreign missionary agency. Again I emphasise that I in no way want to be critical in saying this and it is obvious that European and Western missionaries need the above to maintain reasonable life and service on the field. Mission specialists like Phil Elkins insist on the necessity of good preparation, training and education, as we see in his Perspectives article "Preparation : Pay the Price".

"... What are these basics that everyone needs prior to entering the field? A person needs a solid introductory course in missions taught by one or more experienced missionaries who are professionally trained in the discipline of missiology." (2)

He goes on to mention the importance of language acquisition, understanding the principles of "contextualising the Gospel" followed by other basics including,

"missionary anthropology (cultural anthropology is helpful but needs applications), cross-cultural communication, and extensive studies of what causes churches to grow and what retards growth on the mission field..." (3)

Other godly missionary pioneers like David Adeney in his article "Lifestyle for Servants of Christ" (at Home and Overseas) also brings out the importance of **"identification"** with the local people, a humble learning attitude and **a common intercession of shared sorrows**. As Adeney shares his commitment to the fellow believers in China, one cannot help but be moved by all that has gone on before and give homage to those Western missionaries who have paid the price.

"...In the early days of World War II, we shared in the sorrows and dangers of our fellow believers in China. And they shared in ours. I shall always remember our Chinese fellow workers standing with us by the side of the little grave where our second child was buried, praying that as God had taken our treasure to be with him, our hearts might be drawn closer to heaven..."(4)

However, in spite of everything, it seems that mission is often modelled to the African as something for the "well equipped and well prepared" to do. In looking at the number of requests I receive from Africa (and I know other missions do as well) for, 4 x 4 wheel drive land-cruisers, computers, motorcycles, money for children's education and grants for books and study, I wonder what message and what model we are giving the emerging African missionary movements for becoming a successful worker?

Are we saying that you cannot be a good missionary unless you have money, good health, stable family resources, good education etc? Where does this leave the emerging "rag-tag" missionary workers of French speaking Africa and beyond who are now looking to fulfil their destiny on the front lines of world evangelisation? Where does

this leave your average pygmy whose heart is on fire for God but who possesses no more than his bow and arrow, a mobile leaf “igloo” and a loin cloth ?

All of these thoughts were passing through my mind as the road got bumpier and the equatorial forest thicker! I reflected on how I personally had been brought up to be independent and strong. I thought about how much of the evangelism which I was involved in consisted of the “strong and equipped” going out to the “poor and needy”. Indeed the very notion of being able to “give” someone the gospel can even imply some kind of superiority. The Western world along with its roads, schools, hospitals and commerce has “given” the gospel to Africa. To many the idea of mission still conjures up images of a paternalistic Dr Schweitzer like figure building clinics in the heart of Africa or crowds of happy faced orphans gathered round a godly missionary nurse.

Mission triggers a knee-jerk reaction of “meeting need”.

The conclusion then becomes that you must have certain resources if you're going to meet the needs of others. Ralph Winter in his "World Mission Survey" brings out an important point here in talking about the immense missionary resources in Latin America.

"Can Latin America be a “mission base” ? Here comes Parkinson's sixth law: If you convince people they need help, you may convince them that they cannot help others. Latin believers can become missionaries only to the extent that they no longer see themselves as dependent on missionaries.." (5)

We need to be very careful here. Promoting the “need” of others can effectively disqualify a new generation of missionaries from ever rising. It may make us feel better and keep us in a job but it will prove counterproductive in the end.

A close friend once confided in me how much he hated the help he had received in an orphanage when he was growing up. No-one had been unkind and the folks were loving. He simply hated being a victim of someone else's charity. Some co-workers have shared with me that the people they have often given the most to in material help etc, are the ones they end up having the most problems with, whereas the ones who've been able to help them have been more receptive! So often we want to help folks so as to have an opportunity to share the gospel. I would contend that perhaps we need to learn to be more vulnerable to get the gospel released.

"Have we managed to get things the wrong way round?"

I thought, as we approached the encampment. Bonhoeffer's words from "The Cost of Discipleship" sprang to mind :

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die". (6)

Christ's baseline call is to weakness and vulnerability.

Even Adeney's earlier quotation shows how he bonded with the people, not through his strengths, but through his vulnerability.

As the pygmy Christians surrounded us I seemed to hear God gently speaking :

"Their seeming disadvantages are in fact their strengths. Strengths you no longer possess in the West. Vulnerability equals opportunity."

I then received the passage from *Matthew 25 :31-46*, and was thinking of the little brothers of Jesus while the very present pygmy "little brothers" welcomed us in.

I'd like to study this passage in some depth now in an attempt to back up the argument for vulnerability, and challenge our "need centred" perspectives on mission, while showing what opportunity exists for the emerging multitudes of African workers, whose "leastness" is their most powerful qualification.

In the "Work of Evangelism" J.Herbert Kane cites three major kinds of evangelism : Presence, Proclamation and Persuasion evangelism. (7) He argues strongly for all three to be in place, especially presence and proclamation. Another way of expressing presence evangelism would be "incarnational evangelism" - the message becoming flesh and dwelling amongst a people. Christ, God's Word, became flesh and dwelt among us. Bishop Azariah of Dornakal attributed the mass movement in the Telugu country to the quality of life manifested by the Christians.

"It is universally admitted by all missions and churches that the reason most often given by the converts for accepting the Christian way of life is the impression produced upon them by the changed lives of the Christian community." (8)

This passage is all about the power of presence evangelism to change the destiny of nations. (9) If we look at the task of world evangelisation solely from the point of view of numbers we may get discouraged and miss the goal. Should we be looking for greater numbers of recruits to reach the unreached peoples and ever increasing world population? Obviously this is one part of the job and a certain David Barratt, who is a world authority on statistics and numbers, has two excellent books, "Our Globe and How To Reach It" and "Seven Hundred Plans To Evangelise the World", (10) which go into great detail about the numbers needed and the required "synergy"(i.e. working strategically together) to complete the task. However, I would venture to say that this is not enough - even with seven hundred plus plans!

Numbers are not enough. Christ came a lone man and modelled the gift of a life laid down for the redemption of many.

It is the quality of a sacrificial life which brings salvation to nations.

I believe that our passage in *Matthew 25* is also showing that **a life laid down equals a redemptive opportunity for a nation.** (or an opportunity for judgement). We will see this more clearly as we work through the passage.

Christ, with all His angels, sits on the throne of judgement.

"All the nations (ethnos = ethnic group)*"* are gathered before Him to be judged.

Some are *"blessed"* by the Father and invited to take their eternal inheritance in the kingdom of God, whilst others are cursed and thrown into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. It is all a very serious business. It is interesting to note that the *"nations"* or entire people groups are given an opportunity to respond to a Son of Man that they may not have immediately recognised.

"Lord, when did we see you...?" (repeated 4 times in the passage.)

I would dare to venture that whole people groups are in the process of being prepared to receive Jesus and are already responding to Him even though they do not yet have full knowledge of Him.

This gives me a great hope for the Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists of this world. I am not in any way trying to dilute salvation (*Acts 4 :12*) or condone "universalism", but am simply encouraging us to have a new optimism in seeing the value of presence evangelism, lives laid down amongst the unreached peoples of this world.

We must now answer a very important, pivotal question concerning all of this.

What, or who brings salvation (or damnation) to the nations in this passage?

(Again, salvation is found in Christ alone, but the response of nations to various "incarnations of Christ" is vital here.)

The classic answer would be the poor and disadvantaged of the earth. Many aid agencies use these passages in appeals for finances etc. The argument goes - *"Helping the poor equals helping Christ,"* which, if taken to it's logical conclusion, equals salvation by works as well as a need and guilt-centred view of Christ's work. Jesus said :

"You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me..."

The poor are important and Christian aid is relevant, but I don't believe the primary thrust of this passage is to encourage us Christians, from our riches, to go and help the poor. I actually believe it teaches the opposite. *Verses 40 and 45* hold the key.

"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least (or smallest) of these brothers of mine, you did for me..."

This passage is indeed about the poor. **But the poor are not the poor in general, but the poor brothers of Jesus.** Jesus' brothers who have risked the same walk of vulnerability as their Master.

So who are Jesus' little brothers?

For a start, **born again Christians**, those who know the Father and walk in personal relationship with the Holy Spirit. I believe the “brothers of Jesus” also includes **the Jewish people** in particular, who are Jesus' blood brothers. Paul in *Romans 9 :2-4* prays :

"...I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel...,"

and we do well to remember God's promise to Abraham in *Genesis 12 : 3*.

*"I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you..."*

Israel's vocation was to become a redemptive opportunity for nations.

I believe that she has not been simply replaced by the Church and still maintains a specific signpost role. Nations need to weigh up seriously how they treat Israel. However, the Church age has arrived, and it is now the responsibility of “*little brothers*” of Jesus from many nations to dare to clothe themselves in the missionary mantle of vulnerability, and offer redemptive opportunity to the nations of the earth.

Before looking at how the brothers offer “*redemptive opportunity*”, I believe there is another group of “*little brothers*” of Jesus. I openly admit that some of this may be my own personal opinion, but it seems that **little children**, in the age of innocence, whom Jesus calls to himself, and to whom the kingdom belongs, also offer redemptive opportunity to a nation. This is why abortion and horrendous crimes against the innocent ones in nations will have such terrible consequences.

"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea..."
Matthew 18.5-6.

True mission is about offering redemptive opportunity to others.

It is the exact opposite of the wonderfully strong and together helping the miserable poor.

It is about identifying so strongly with Christ in his hunger, thirst, foreignness, nakedness, sickness and incarceration, that we give peoples the opportunity to respond to Him, enabling them, in some mysterious way, to discover more of Him.

Christ became poor so that we might become rich. He made himself nothing. Paul stated that :

"We carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you..." 2 Corinthians 4 :10-12

The life of Jesus revealed in the bodies of those little missionary brothers willing to be on display and vulnerable in the nations.

"When did we see you hungry?"

Jesus himself knew hunger :

"After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry." Luke 4 :2

Jesus made himself available to receive hospitality.

"Zaccheus, come down immediately! I must stay at your house today." Luke 19 :5

His vulnerability in this area opened up the opportunity for Zaccheus to repent.

"Today salvation has come to this house ..." Luke 19 :9

Mary and Martha's hospitality enabled them to fellowship with Jesus.

The apostle Paul cited his own missionary experience in *2 Corinthians 11:25-30* :

"... I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food..."

Hunger may be a very real issue for emerging African workers. Jesus said that even someone giving a cup of cold water to one of His disciples wouldn't fail to have a reward. How much more those, who willingly share their bread with the hungry little brothers of Jesus. I find this a deep challenge to my own well fed culture. Having spent many months in North Africa, where hospitality has been a hallmark of many of the Muslim families, the very fact of receiving a meal may offer the possibility for some to touch Jesus for the very first time. **I believe redemptive power and possibility is released when we humble ourselves to receive.**

Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink and salvation came to a whole village (*John 4 :1-42*) :

"... We know that this man really is the Saviour of the world..."

"When did we see you thirsty ?"

Paul was often thirsty. Some of my African friends and colleagues have walked over a hundred miles, through forest in the heat of the day, to bring the gospel to hidden villages. I wonder what their first phrase is on arriving ? Are we still thirsty ?

"When did we see you a stranger?"

The true missionary is inevitably a stranger. New cultures and new languages need to be learned. E. Brewster in his book *"Bonding and The Missionary Task"* recognises that, rather than being a weakness, **the vulnerability of language learning opens up much opportunity to share Jesus.**

*"From the very first day it is important to develop many meaningful relationships with people. The newcomer should early communicate his needs and his desire to be a learner. **People help people who are in need!** Over 30 people came to know Christ as a result of the involvement ministry that these new language learners were able to develop during those (first) three months ..." (11)*

Christ Himself became a stranger.

"He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God ..."
John 1.11-12.

The opportunity of every cross-cultural missionary will be to become a vulnerable stranger.

"When did we see you naked ?"

Not quite such an option for most Western missionaries, unless you're called to beach evangelism in some parts of Southern France! Pygmy Christians may be able to identify somewhat.

Job cried out :

"Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall depart..."

Christ came a naked babe into the world and departed a naked man on the cross. His nakedness clothed a guilty world with grace. His was the prophetic animal skin sacrifice which clothed Adam and Eve's shame. (*Gen.3 :21*)

The apostle Paul confessed :

"I have been cold and naked,"

and probably the most painful, shocking images of the holocaust are of the mass nakedness of thousands lined up for the gas chambers, or piled up in gruesome mass graves. The Jews too, have known what it is to be vulnerable little brothers of Jesus.

"When did we see you sick ?"

We come back to Paul, the man who healed so many, as he witnesses to the Galatian Christians :

"... As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself..." Galatians 4 :13-14

As if he were Christ Jesus! Once again we see how Paul became a **“redemptive opportunity”** for the Galatians due to his sickness and vulnerability.

When I go to Africa I can afford to take the latest expensive anti-malarial tablets. Many of my African colleagues cannot and are sick. In fact, disease and ill health seem so common. Many of the eleventh hour workers for the final ingathering of souls may well have A.I.D.S. :

"...In some towns and cities in Central Africa, up to a third of all young adults are now thought to be infected... In some hospitals between eight and twenty three pints of blood out of 100 are infected with HIV One relief agency has talked unofficially about pulling out of Central Africa. "What's the point in drilling more wells when most of the people will be dead in a few years." The World Health Organisation says 9 million were infected by early 1994.... In 1991 I was told by a trusted colleague that he thought it would be hard to find a family in the African city where he lived who was not attending an A.I.D.S. funeral on average once a month... In Africa they call it the 'slim' disease... The children's wards are 'full of dying children'. Many are babies under one or two years old. Many are not dying of famine but of A.I.D.S. A terrible tragedy is that many caught the virus not while in their mother's wombs, but from the use of unsterilised needles..." (12)

Already, some of my most valued colleagues in the Central African Republic have died of A.I.D.S. since we began working together twelve years ago.

Is A.I.D.S. a curse from God, or a global opportunity demanding a response from the nations? God hates sickness, and I in no way want to glorify it. However, the vulnerability it brings can be a **“redemptive opportunity”** for others. We see this clearly

in *Isaiah 53 :4-5*, when the suffering servant, the Lord Jesus, takes upon himself our sicknesses in order to bring our healing.

*"...Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows...
and by his wounds we are healed..."*

"When did we see you in prison ?"

What an opportunity for "closed country" evangelism. Many little brothers of Jesus in China, Morocco, Russia and Pakistan know the prison experience like their predecessor the apostle Paul who had :

*"worked much harder, **been in prison more frequently**, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again..." 2 Corinthians 11 :23*

Who knows how many pagan peoples have been given redemptive opportunity by the kindness they have shown to such heroes of the faith, or how many have confirmed their lostness through their cruelty ? Such little brothers in prison have indeed been following Christ in "triumphant procession" throughout the ages. Their weakness, vulnerability and brokenness has been spreading,

"everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task ?"
2 Corinthians 2 :15-16

It is hard to be dogmatic about such mysterious truths, but I would venture to conclude that the missionary endeavour must dare to be vulnerable.

The new African, and other missionary armies from the Global South, have a distinct advantage over the West in this area. **Their weaknesses, far from disqualifying them for missionary service, are in fact their strengths.** God is wanting to bare His holy arm to the world in raising up these redemptive incarnations of His love to the nations.

"And who indeed is equal to the task ?"

Endnotes

- 1) Pygmy is actually a derogatory term in C.A.R. as this people group have been so badly treated in the past. In the country it is better to use the various tribal names like Baka or the French word 'citoyens' (citizens). For the purposes of this chapter however I will retain the use of the word pygmy as it carries no offence in Western Europe.
- 2) Elkins, P., Preparation - Pay The Price, Perspectives, Paternoster Press, London, 1992, P.D.278.
- 3) Ibid, P.D.280.
- 4) Adeney, D., Lifestyle for Servants of Christ, Perspectives, Paternoster Press, London, 1992, P.D.284.
- 5) Winter, R., World Mission Survey, Perspectives, Paternoster Press, London, 1992, P.B.197.
- 6) Bonhoeffer, D., The Cost of Discipleship, Macmillan Pub., New York, 1963, P.99.
- 7) J.H. Kane, The Work of Evangelism, Perspectives, Paternoster Press, London, 1992P.D.33-34.
- 8) C.R. Padilla, The New Face of Evangelism, IVP, London, 1976, P.80.
- 9) See Mathew Henry's Commentary, Vol V, P.P.378-384 for a more traditional (and wordy!) interpretation.
- 10) Barrat & Johnson, Our Globe and How to Reach It and Seven Hundreds Plans to Evangelise the World, AD 2000 series, 1990 - 1988.
- 11) Brewster, Thomas and Elisabeth, Bonding and The Missionary Task, Perspectives, Paternoster Press, London, 1992, P.C.111.
- 12) Dixon, Patrick, The Truth About A.I.D.S., Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, 1994, P.P.20-22.

