

# Befriending: The Heart of Mission

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**T**he poet, TS Eliot, once said that the years between 50 and 70 were the most dangerous: 'You're always being asked to do something and you're not decrepit enough to refuse.' Some months ago I was asked by the editor of an English journal to write a reflection on the events of 11 September. I felt nervous enough about it to send it to friends beforehand for comment. The Europeans and Muslim friends in Pakistan and abroad thought it 'accurate' and 'good' – and hoped it would 'be read on the other side of the Atlantic.' Most of my American friends felt the same. The few who disagreed were rather blunt and I don't think I have ever been called so many names before in my whole life. This surprised me: I am not used to violent reactions to what I write or preach! My first impulse was to try and see in what way I just might be some of the names I was called. I reread the article and the e-mails and letters again and again and decided I could not change anything I had written. The problem was not so much in what I had written but in the buttons I pushed, especially the one marked 'anti-American.'

One French writer, in an early 19th century book on democracy in America, believed that 'men will not receive the truth from their enemies, and it is seldom offered to them by their friends.' I fear I may have lost some friends, who now classify me among the enemy (and this counting of enemies seems to be the new American pastime!). It puzzles me why this should be so but I have begun to think it has to do with an unwillingness to test assumptions and adjust them in the light of new challenges.

## Testing Assumptions

Assumptions about 'Mission' used to be fairly straightforward, with an almost military precision about them. There were goals, objectives and ways of measuring success by annual reporting of conversions and baptisms. When I first arrived in Pakistan in the 60s, Catholics still spoke of themselves as 'the church,' and Protestants as 'the other mission.' Most 'missionary' activity was nothing more than 'sheep-stealing.' The attitude toward non-Christians was antipathetic, apologetic, and defensive. I remember meeting one little girl walking in the church compound with a younger boy tagging along behind her. After asking her name, I said, 'And what is his name?' She replied, 'Father, he's Muslim,' surprised that I would be interested in him!

The church has always been 'mission-minded,' but not always 'other-centred.' This has meant that mission often served the church's agenda rather than God's. Mission became something to do rather than attention to the mystery of what God is doing. Mission now, however, is not about 'getting something done' but rather learning how not to do. We are on the frontiers of a new world whose contours have yet to be mapped. Instant communication and the effects of an ambiguous globalisation, have made us aware of a world that is pluriform, in which the fastest growing religion is Islam. And we are more aware of the fact of difference. But we have also been made aware, from recent history in East Africa, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Pakistan and India, that there is often violent unwillingness to accept difference as a fact of life. Our frontier is a tottering fence.

A contemporary historian describes three ways of thinking and feeling of those who live on the frontier. There is, he writes, a new self-awareness: 'We notice who we are, how we are thinking, what we are doing.' There is also an openness to change, for 'when we encounter something different, our appetites are whetted for newness.' And 'in the face of the different and unfamiliar, we seek to reassure one another as we organise our new forms of community': there is a new community consciousness. These three ways are helpful in our attempts to elaborate a new way of thinking about mission in this new world.

Self-awareness: The theologian, Paul Tillich, described conversion as an 'ontological necessity,' but he understands by this 'an opening of the eyes, a revelation experience.' To come to a new self-awareness is to change – but it is always others who open our eyes and reveal to us who we are. Part of this self-awareness is the realisation that if Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists can reveal to us our true selves, then we must commit ourselves not just to dialogue but to something more than dialogue. The realisation compels us to move beyond dialogue as something we do, to living dialogue as a way of life. This is an insight into our very way of being in

this religiously pluralist world and it somehow enters into the definition of who we are as Christians.

Openness to change: the encounter with other believers who are not Christian offers a possibility of seeing Jesus in a new way. He is in us, as Paul says, as mystery and hope and promise of completion (Col 1.27). Jesus is alive in our world, is being completed in our world, is coming to be in our changed world. This is reinforced in some Muslim traditions, where Jesus is referred to as 'the traveler,' or 'the one on the path.' This suggests life and movement – and a Jesus who is elusive, never-caught-up-with, beckoning us further into the journey, not toward certainty but deeper into faith and mystery and hope of completion. Jesus makes us ready for the new ways of God!

Community consciousness: Meeting others influences our awareness of who we are as church: we are a church for others. It is the others on our frontier who invite us to move from an understanding of the church's mission as 'a program for action' to a 'waiting on God.' It is an invitation to share in God's great adventure and God's loving embrace of the world. This new awareness of who we are leads us to redefine mission as 'cooperating with other believers so that God's purposes might be revealed.' We even have models from history to help us. In the 13th century there was created 'by Christian, Muslim, and Jewish forces the near-miracle of a tolerant humanism on the basis of current traditions at the court of Emperor Frederick II in Sicily.'

'By dialogue,' as the present pope said, 'we let God be present in our midst, for as we open ourselves to one another, we open ourselves to God.' (5 February 1986).

To come to such a realisation, living on the frontier, is to experience a conversion that is, at the same time, both painful and liberating. St Thomas Aquinas, eg, links the Beatitude of Mourning with those who seek after truth. There is mourning and grieving in leaving a truth that worked, comforted and gave meaning for a new truth, untried and uncomfortable. There is some discomfort in responding to the truth of many possibilities, instead of subscribing to one all-encompassing truth. But this is the familiar Exodus from the slavery of Egypt, through the desert (looking back in longing for the 'leeks and onions and flesh-pots of Egypt'), into a 'land of promise,' and into freedom. What sustains us is God's promise that he 'will be for us who he is,' and whom we will discover as we follow not just the 'pillar of fire,' but 'the pillar of cloud.'

At a time of mourning, when the cloud descends, our homes are generally full of people, some of them perfect strangers, who nevertheless reveal a side of the dead relative that had perhaps been hidden from the family. We are sustained and aided in our journey of discovery by 'perfect strangers' who join us for a time to share their own meanings and reveal to us the Jesus we thought we knew.

## **New Challenges**

There is something adventurous about a theological journey on the frontiers, accepting the challenge of the great world religions, 'risking Christ for Christ's sake,' in the words of the great Indian ecumenist, MM Thomas. 'Interreligious dialogue,' as David Tracy observes, 'is a crucial issue which will transform all Christian theology in the long run... We are fast approaching the day when it will not be possible to attempt a Christian systematic theology except in serious conversation with the other great ways.'

It is precisely 'the challenge of religious pluralism that invites us to return to the heart of the Christian paradox as the religion of the Incarnation and the religion of the kenosis of God.' It is for this reason that Claude Geffre can define Christianity as 'a religion of otherness.' This, then, is a challenge that invites us to return to ourselves, to our true identity, as people for others.

It is a challenge that is provocative and stimulating. Most significant is how this emphasis on the 'otherness' of Christianity, even before affecting our theology and how we think about mission, can – and indeed must – affect the way we relate to Others. 'Taking cultural and religious pluralism seriously – engaging in global coalition building for the active promotion of coexistence and cooperation – is one of the most important global issues in the 21st century.' It may be the most important issue. I have been fascinated in recent years by the thinking of the Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, who turned philosophy upside down in his insistence that it is ethics, not metaphysics, that is the 'first' philosophy, so that 'being in relationship' is much more basic than simply 'being.' Levinas is fond of quoting Aloyosha Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'We are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others.' This is a thought that can, as one commentator said, 'make us tremble,' for we are then endlessly obligated to the Other, responsible for the Other, and the good (in the form

of fraternity and discourse) takes precedence over the true. To be oneself is to be for others.

## Entertaining elephants

In Pakistan, almost every farmer will speak of 'my wife, my land, my children, my cow – and my enemy,' to describe who he is. The one who is different, and dangerous, is part of one's identity. This can, of course, take over, and result in – what I believe – is a paranoid society. One English language journal some years ago, in a lead article, asked: 'Pakistan without enemies: whatever would we do?' The truth in this is, of course, that the other does enter into our self-definition and determines how we act. The Other comes to us in different guises: guest, friend, stranger, sometimes enemy. Each meeting is important because in each is the ethical challenge to embrace responsibility and, 'by being for others, to be oneself.' This carries with it risk, daring and surprise. Ancient Persian wisdom advises: Do not welcome elephant trainers into your tent unless you are prepared to entertain elephants.

The scriptural criterion for good action, according to the Books of the Law and the message of the prophets, was always dependent on how the orphan, the widow and the stranger were treated. Thus, in Deuteronomy: 'The Lord your God... is not partial. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the stranger, therefore, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (10.17-19). Leviticus is even more specific: 'When a stranger sojourns with you in the land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (19.33-34). And Exodus gives as the reason for not oppressing the stranger this: 'You know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (23.9).

## The company of strangers

The classic passage of welcoming and surprise is Abraham's welcoming the three strangers at Mamre (Gen 18.1-15), preparing a meal for them, after which they turn out to be angels bearing a message of a future far different from the one Abraham and Sarah imagined. And it is this meeting that the writer of Hebrews has in mind, recommending: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares' (13.2).

The theme of mealtime hospitality is characteristic of the gospels. Jesus and his disciples did not seem to work, left their nets, their regular family life, and enjoyed the hospitality of many, both poor and rich. 'The community of disciples gathered around Jesus... came from various socioeconomic strata... John Koenig [in New Testament Hospitality] imagines that "Jesus and his disciples must have confused their Galilean contemporaries," since they were so diverse and depended so heavily upon "the giving and receiving of welcomes." Tax collectors and fishermen were not usual companions, and given the subsequent conflicts among them, they were not "one big happy family." To the contrary, they might best be described... as "the company of strangers," whom Jesus not only welcomed but sought out and invited.

'Giving and receiving' is most extreme in Jesus' giving of himself. 'God's giving includes self-sacrifice. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and wine and gave himself to the company of strangers who were his disciples. He linked these actions and words regarding his fate and ministry to the breaking in of God's realm. In this meal, through his self-giving, self-sacrificing presence, their lives were opened up to and through the "stranger."

St Paul condemns the Corinthians because when they assemble as a church they maintain 'divisions' and 'factions' – they remain strangers – so that 'it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk' (1 Cor 11.20-21). This insight leads him, in the same letter, to be very cautious about 'speaking in tongues.' Its usefulness depends on its being understood by others: 'If you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking to the moon. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning; but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a stranger to the speaker and the speaker a stranger to me' (14.9-11).

Just as the appeal in the Book of Exodus (about knowing the heart of the stranger, 'for you were strangers in Egypt') is to a shared human experience as providing common ground, so is Paul's vision of strangers becoming community rooted in the experience of what God did in Jesus. 'In Christ God was making friends with the world...and entrust[ed] to us the task of making friends' (2 Cor 5.19). This is why he entreats the Romans to

'practice hospitality' (12.13). But to be 'hospitable,' to welcome them as guests, strangers have to be looked at as 'like us' in needs, experiences, and expectations. 'It was not sufficient,' writes Christine D Pohl, 'that strangers be vulnerable; hosts had to identify with their experiences of vulnerability and suffering before they welcomed them.' Perhaps linked to this obligation to hospitality is the awareness of our own culpability as part of a social system which produces strangers, displaced and vulnerable.

### **The role of imagination**

One commentator on the horrific events of September 2001, saw them as a failure of imagination: had the terrorists been able to imagine themselves as passengers on those planes, they would never have done what they did. It might be useful to think about what it is that causes a failure of imagination. Timothy Radcliffe, in an address to Yale University in 1996, saw the university as a place 'where one learned how to talk to strangers.' He quotes the poet William Blake to expose what he believes to be one of the blocks to communication: 'May God keep us / from single vision...' Singleness of vision led to the September attacks; it is responsible for the brutal murders of the seven Trappist monks and Bishop Claverie in Algeria in 1996 and four attacks on churches in Pakistan this year alone. Singleness of vision is a characteristic of all religious fundamentalism, whether Muslim or Christian; and singleness of vision is also endorsed by the present US administration in its response to terrorism. 'The more the US mobilises for war, the more ordinary Americans must be persuaded to reduce their view of the world to good versus evil, western liberalism versus Islamic terrorism, or, most primitively, "us versus them." Nuance, balance, and any sense of reciprocity must cease. Learning to see the world from varying points of view must be eliminated so that only one view will predominate. Anyone who questions it must be denounced for siding with the terrorists and cast out off the community of faith.'

There is a huge difference between imagination and delusion. There is a story from my part of the world about Mullah Nasiruddin, whom a friend came across one night in the middle of the road, under a bright shining moon. Mullah was on his hands and knees. The friend asked, 'Mullah, what are you doing?' 'I'm looking for my key,' said Mullah. 'I'll help you,' said the friend, and he too got down on his hands and knees and began looking through the dust. After an hour searching, the friend said, 'Mullah, where did you lose it?' 'Over there, by the door,' said Nasiruddin. 'Then, why don't you look over there?' said the friend. 'Don't be stupid,' said Mullah, 'there's more light here!'

The moral, of course, is that ideal conditions are never there in the search for keys or answers. A laboratory with controlled experiments yields results that can be trusted. Life is much messier and unpredictable. And attempts to impose order result rather in totalitarian violence and the obliteration of individual differences by ethnic cleansing. To break the cycle of violence and vengeance the scriptural remedy is uncompromisingly clear: 'love your enemies' (Mt 5.43), 'extend hospitality to strangers' (Rom 12.13).  
'Taking to oneself'

The Greek word used in the New Testament for hospitality or welcome (proslambanomai: compound of lambano, 'take, receive, possess') is not about taking aside a brother whose conduct is not in harmony with ours. The verb indicates that we must also 'take him with us' and 'introduce him warmly into our fellowship.' This 'taking to oneself' and what it really involves is seen in another word Paul uses in Romans (12.13), where hospitality is philoxenia. Not just welcoming but 'loving the stranger.' We know what xenophobia, 'hatred of the stranger,' is, for it is a word and a reality we are quite familiar with today. We may not be as familiar with the word philoxenia, but it is the original name, eg, of Rubilev's famous ikon of the three angels (which we know as the Trinity). The angels are seated around a table with an empty place in the foreground set for the guest/stranger. It is good to link the two names, 'love of the stranger' and 'the Trinity' because it is in the Trinity that we find the model and the motive for 'loving the stranger.'

'Christianity,' as Gregory of Nyssa says, 'is the imitation of God's nature.' This finds an echo in Aquinas, who teaches that 'we are made, not in the image of the Son, as many think, but in the image of the Trinity.' The Trinity is in our very genes! And the Trinity is a mystery of relationship. We are made not for isolation but for interdependence and the summit of this relationship is when 'my brother and I arrive at that moment when we reach out to touch each other in mutual healing.'

Meister Eckhart, the great 14th century Dominican, once said, 'You may call God love, you may call God good, but the best name for God is compassion.' It is this that best describes our relationship with the Trinity: God relates to us in mercy, and it is mercy that best describes mission. It is not the great 'commissioning texts' at the end of the gospels of Mark and Matthew ('Go and baptize...') that are foundational for mission, but rather

passages like 2 Cor 1.3-7, which defines mission as *paraklesis*, as consoling or 'comforting.' Paul writes, 'Blessed be... the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation...'

What is interesting about this passage, like those from Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, is the appeal to experience: God consoles us so that we may console others with the same consolation we have received. Even what we suffer is for others' consolation. There is no other motive for mission than in seeking out the vulnerable, in this healing and comforting relationship.

It is God as Paraclete, God as comforter, who reminds us of his mercies: 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning...' (Lam 3.22-23). As God's Spirit works, so must the church. The church's mission, like God's mission, arises out of a passion for all that is and all that can be. The church's task is *paraklesis*, or 'comforting appeal.'

This seems to me terribly important. If the Spirit is the first way that God sends and is sent, then the Spirit's activity becomes the foundation of the church's own missionary nature. Its task is, like that of Jesus, to follow the Spirit's lead and to be the concrete face of the Spirit in the world.

It is the Spirit that makes dialogue both possible and necessary. Cyril of Alexandria, in his commentary of St John's Gospel (Bk II,II) writes about 'our unity in the Spirit... we have all received one and the same Spirit, the Holy Spirit, and so in a certain sense are mingled with one another and with God.' Not just with other Christians. Since the Spirit is the way God is present to humankind from the beginning of its experience, we Christians are already in relation to women and men of other religious ways. In this world, which St Augustine called, 'a smiling place,' God, in the Spirit, is making friends. And calls us to a mission of befriending.

### **Embrace as a theological response**

It is befriending that has to be at the heart of mission and any theology of religions. Jacques Dupuis, in a review of Michael Barnes's new book believes Barnes shows that 'any future theology of religions will have to be not only a theology for dialogue or in dialogue but a theology of dialogue, developed from and within the relationship between the participants.' The basic requirement is 'respecting the otherness of the other religion,' ie, not an approach centred on Christianity but on the mystery of the encounter. Not concerned with 'fitting' the Other into our own story but rather 'engaging with the meaning of the providential mystery of the stranger for the life of the church as a whole.'

The prophet Isaiah (58.6-8) says we are all 'kin,' of one flesh and blood, and perhaps never more so than now. While listening drowsily to the BBC one night, I discovered that it can be statistically established that any one of us at any given time is only 'six lengths away' from any other person: the president of the US, the queen of England, a peasant in Thailand: because we all know someone who knows someone who knows someone else. Human networking is fascinating but it only makes recent history all the more painful and difficult to understand. I believe we have to search for meaning together, for without acknowledging our kinship with those who are different, we will remain with but half an answer.

We are presented today with a disturbing reality. Otherness, the simple fact of being different in some way, has come to be defined as in and of itself evil. Miroslav Volf is a native Croatian, who, in his 'theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation,' writes from his own experience of teaching in Croatia during the war. He contends that if the healing word of the gospel is to be heard today, theology must find ways of speaking that address the hatred of the other, and proposes the idea of embrace as a theological response to the problem of exclusion. Increasingly we see that exclusion has become the primary sin, skewing our perceptions of reality and causing us to react out of fear and anger to all those who are not within our (ever-narrowing) circle. In light of this, Christians must learn that salvation comes, not only as we are reconciled to God, and not only as we 'learn to live with one another,' but as we take the dangerous and costly step of opening ourselves to the other, of enfolding him or her in the same embrace with which we have been enfolded by God. This is not easy, but, as St John Chrysostom reminds us, it is necessary: 'It might be possible,' he writes, 'for a person to love without risking danger – but this is not the case with us!' Jesus calls us 'friends,' tells us to 'befriend' and 'love one another,' (Jn 15.14-17) in a risky and dangerous embrace which mirrors his own.

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