

What happens when we really engage in God's mission?

Two readings

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (*Mark 7:24-30*)

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly. (*Matthew 15:21-28*)

We rediscover not only global vision, but global covenant.

God's challenge to us more and more is to play our part in God's mission on a global stage. Each day in the classroom at the Selly Oak Centre for Mission Studies in Birmingham, we meet the world; Myanmar, The Gambia, Fiji, Lithuania, the Solomon Islands, Northern Ireland, to name but a few countries represented by this year's group. For a long time the Selly Oak Colleges through international mission education have created a kind of artificial and temporary 'global stage' But to move around the city of Birmingham and many urban contexts in Europe is to move on a permanent and real global stage. The Methodist Church in London is now a black majority church. 2 years ago, the Methodist Church in Britain hosted a consultation called 'Ethnicity, Cohesion and the Church.' A gathering of leaders from ethnic majority congregations – the Iranian, Farsi speaking congregation from Doncaster, the Fijian congregation from Cannock, to name just two of many examples. At the European Methodist Festival in Bratislava the other year I walked into the big tent looking forward to meeting East Europeans, and who were the first people The Ghanaian Methodist Choir from London. I went up to their chaplain, a much valued colleague the Revd Emmanuel Aggey Ogoe and said to him, 'Can I not get away from you people?!' Another face of global Methodism in Europe.

Now let me not even begin to speak with any authority about the changing global face of Ireland North and South. But without doubt, you are changing are you not? It's difficult to look at official statistics when looking at all-Ireland as we need to in Irish Methodism. But one set of CSO statistics shows that the number of work permits issued to non-Irish migrant workers exploded from less than 6,000 in 1999 to about 50,000 in 2003. Moreover, the great majority of migrant workers have been legally employed in relatively low-skilled occupations. The number of persons seeking asylum in Ireland increased dramatically from only 362 in 1994 to 11,634 in 2002, before falling again to 7,900 in 2003 (see Figure 2). In 2002 - the year when applications peaked - the top six stated countries of origin of asylum seekers were Nigeria (34.8 percent), Romania (14.4 percent), Moldova (4.6 percent), Zimbabwe (3.1 percent), Ukraine (3.0 percent), and Poland (2.7 percent). I'll be interested to hear more about how Irish Methodism experiences the reality of those statistics in the make up of its congregations, communities and neighbourhoods.

The mission challenge this brings, is that when we operate on an increasingly global stage, we have to re-examine global covenant with one another in the name of Christ. And this takes us right back to the Methodist Covenant prayer.

Think of our much loved Covenant service. One line of the Covenant prayer in its traditional version says; 'Rank me with whom you will.' There are overtones of the army and military status somehow. Or are we at the taxi rank; everyone lined up with the same end in mind and an equal chance of reaching it? If we pray, 'Rank me with whom you will,' what does that mean for global vision and global covenant and how might Mark 7.24-30 and Matthew 15. 21-28 help us to understand what it might mean? The SyroPhoenician woman and Jesus had probably not prayed; rank me with whom you will. Nevertheless God threw them

together. And they were a bit of a nuisance to each other. An encounter it would have been easier not to have. Don't rank me with whom you will, Lord – let me have a choice.

Being ranked together through geography and movement

What throws us together comfortably or uncomfortably? Let's think *geography and movement*. Why do people move to the places they move to and settle in the places they settle? Jesus was always moving in mission; across foreign territories and into foreign parts. As we see here - into Tyre & Sidon, where this encounter took place. If he hadn't moved, it wouldn't have done. Sometimes the gospel writers seem to manufacture rather strange routes for Jesus – often their purpose is to show his itinerant nature, his ability even as a Jewish teacher to move and mix across Gentile territories. Often brushing up against the authorities. People travelling across continents know all about that. Sometimes geographical movement comes of someone's own free. Sometimes it is forced upon them? It's very different thing if we're moving across continents to start that dream job we've just been appointed to than if we're moving out of fear and hoping for asylum. Or if in the place we settle we find new neighbours who share the same faith, values, outlook and we live peaceably together in the same street. Or, it can be quite the opposite. What about if you're in Iraq and the new neighbour you meet when you open your front door is a US soldier sitting on a tank, there by invasion rather than invitation? Rank me with whom you will? So there's a real challenge when we stand in the place of our birth or the place of our settling, and find that God has ranked us with a whole load of people, some of whom we feel we could well do without. And Christians can find that just as difficult as anyone else. When one small white, English Methodist congregation in UK finds itself ranked with a larger and growing one, with considerably different language and customs. Urdu speaking whose members are mostly from Pakistan. When Christians in a border town find their congregations are filled with and therefore God has ranked them with refugees. It can be scary and difficult to pray in the spirit of Covenant – rank me with whom you will geographically. There's many a Christian if we were searingly honest whose prayer remains not rank me with, but separate me from.

Being ranked together through culture and status

What else throws us together comfortably or uncomfortably? Think *culture and status*. She's described as a Canaanite woman in Matthew and Syro-Phoenician in Mark. Is she the product of a mixed marriage herself? A Syrian-Phoenician union? Is she poor or rich? We often immediately think 'poor woman', but Tyre was a wealthy trading city – Galileans went hungry to supply Tyre. Could she be a cultured and wealthy Greek speaking woman? She could certainly debate with intelligence – she wasn't afraid to use her voice. So maybe we have the cultured and wealthy Gentile woman versus the itinerant Jewish carpenter/teacher from Nazareth of all places. Now who's ranked with whom? And who has the upper hand? At our Mission Centre we work with people from the British and Irish Methodist Churches going to serve as Mission Partners in another part of the world church. Still quite a number of them seem to want to say; rank me with the poor - please – so that I can go and feel that I'm helping *poor, impoverished, needy Africa* – that easy, ignorant and patronising stereotype of an extraordinary Continent. And I am certainly not undermining or being flippant about the realities of global poverty. Then you venture to suggest to the Mission Partner in question; well supposing you end up living in Lagos or Nairobi or Capetown – pretty developed cities - and you find your African neighbours are professional people earning far more than you, they have better degrees and a far better house. Back comes the answer. No, don't rank me with them that feels very uncomfortable – there's no mission to 'do' there! OK then, let's rank you with the poor. But if you mean that – why are you packing all this freight? Don't take any belongings with you, just go with a toothbrush. Go as an economic equal as far as you can. Ooh – no – I don't want to be ranked that closely with the poor!! So the people of God – and the people of God who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ – where you hope the ground rules might be different, still have enormous problems being ranked alongside other people of God – in their diversity of culture and status.

Being ranked together through common humanity and reciprocal need

What else throws us together? Think *common humanity and reciprocal need*. There's no need greater in the gut than a sick child – right? Ask any parent. This is another reason the encounter happens – the woman needs help at basic level. How do we express our common humanity and reciprocal need in a way which is acceptable to and understood by one another? In Mark's version, this need is expressed through the woman coming respectfully inside the house where Jesus already is and bowing low at his feet. In Matthew's version the need is first expressed by her running outside and yelling at him in the street. Which approach was politically correct? What does it mean for me to be ranked with those whose language and behaviour seem acceptable and appropriate culturally. And those whose behaviour seems quite the opposite; In a global, culturally diverse Church, are we free to speak and to be authentic and natural in the way we express our common humanity and reciprocal need or do we need to speak and act in certain ways to be understood? And

who decides. Interestingly, the thing Jesus praises here is not whether she's quiet or whether she's noisy; he praises her faith and her insight. In Mark: for saying that – the demon has left your daughter. In Matthew: Women, great is your faith. One commentator, R T France wonders if Jesus is actually complimenting this woman by valuing her audacity, her sharp mind and by having a very forceful, direct exchange with her. Other commentators would say he's off the wall and Jesus is being nothing else but insulting, chauvinistic and power crazed. But I find it interesting. So you have to imagine the exchange as very direct, touched with a sort of conspiratorial humour – I can't give children's food to the dogs can I? To which, quick as a flash she says – OK if I'm a dog I'm entitled to the dogs' rations! France suggests she's a real, far sighted theologian – she's not demeaned actually – she knows that God's plan for the true faith of Israel narrow as it is now will embrace all cultures and nationalities and she's claiming her entitlement. I may be on my knees nibbling the crumbs now my Lord but you see if I'm not present at the great feast! How good are you in the Irish Methodist Churches at directness with each other; the sharp exchange between equals, intelligent argument in the service of faith? Or are we still at the stage of a kind of stifling politeness with each other which aches for the sword of truth to pierce it through?

Global covenant requires not exclusion but embrace

Rank me with whom you will Lord. I recognise that geography, movement, culture, status, common humanity, and reciprocal need will all feature as I look around at those with whom I am ranked. And at that point I want to propose an extension to that line in the covenant prayer to make it a truly global covenant prayer. Rank me with whom you will, Lord, *and I will embrace them, in your name.*

It's not enough to stand in the ranks with others of difference. Soldiers in their ranks can stand to attention in perfect harmony when ordered to. The question is – can they stand at ease with each other? Can they, when they put down their weapons and go to the mess, embrace each other as equals.

It's a strange business embracing isn't it? How many people have you hugged at this conference? And did you wonder if you were right to or not; better to shake hands, hugging is a cultural nightmare actually – touching or not touching? Women to men? For how long?!

But the embrace of love in the name of Jesus Christ is never inappropriate. In fact it is compulsory in global covenant. Rank me with whom you will, Lord, and I will embrace them, in your name.

It's the title of Miroslav Volf's book *Exclusion and Embrace*.¹ Volf is a Croatian theologian whose family knew horrendous persecution so he knows a thing or two about the costliness of being ranked with those of difference and of the call to embrace. In his book, he takes us through the drama and the theology of embrace. It is a fourfold movement.

Opening the arms: In the Irish Methodist Connexion who needs to open the arms to whom? Where are the defiant, folded and excluding arms?

Waiting: In the IMC Connexion is there the capacity to wait patiently for one another, trusting that embrace will come, but knowing that we are at different places in our understandings of global mission

Closing the arms: In the IMC, who needs to be held and surrounded with special care and attention at this time?

Opening them again: In the IMC, does the embrace become smothering and imprisoning – the inflexible embrace which demands certain behaviours and conformities from those of difference? Or are we able to set each other free?

I would want to suggest that Jesus and the Canaanite woman transformed a potentially very excluding encounter into one of unexpected embrace. This is never an easy journey. But the result of exclusion becoming embrace in these readings? Healing occurs and demons flee.

So what happens when we really engage in God's mission? We rediscover not only global vision, but global covenant. But better not to pray 'rank me with whom you will,' unless we really mean it.

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¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and embrace*, 1996, Nashville, Abingdon Press