



PRIESTS IN THE BORDERLANDS

She came into the room carefully moving her pram, her very movements betraying her unfamiliarity with this new phase of life and its accoutrements. Her baby was asleep, tiny amidst the blankets, surely the youngest child here, and she the youngest mother.

She stood out for other reasons. She was white, for a start, and English speaking. That made us both different in this room. But here amidst the noise and chaos of Childsplay, the space seemingly bursting with toddlers, their mothers long accustomed to their roles and confident, she stood as if upon a threshold, gazing in at this new world, uncertain.

As I greeted her, I was conscious of a sudden stab of empathy; a memory of being in her place once,

now many years ago. I could relate to that sense of shock at having moved from the security of young adulthood and the confidence of that simple life, to this messy, noisy, unordered world of motherhood. She'd been a young professional. In that world she had learned to negotiate the work place and started out in relationships, she had earned her way, found her feet. But now she's faced with a room full of strangers - life has burst in on her, unsuspecting - her job is on hold indefinitely and her task is to learn how to be in a world she hadn't known existed.

The room she had entered on this day was full and loud with children playing and women chatting. Somali ladies, larger than life in their *direh* and *burquas*, grouped in one area and several Lithuanians gathered in another. A Thai lady chased her young son whilst talking loudly into her mobile while another of mixed nationality sat back and unfolded a little as her children dived into the soft play area. I was aware that this environment alone must have increased the sense of isolation and difference as the young woman trod gingerly across the stained carpet, careful not to tread on someone else's offspring - and so I reached out and offered her the universal panacea, a cup of tea.

It struck me then that each of the women in that room had at one point crossed boundaries, from one world to another. Some of them had done this several times, not always willingly. For some the experience had been deeply traumatic, escaping from a world of violence, bloodshed and existential unpredictability and thrust into a world that remained ignorant of their histories and culture, their language and their pain. For others the transition had been more gentle and the benefits more tangible - a choice made in freedom. All, of course, had become mothers, but some had done so in community, with friends and relatives to help and others alone and in an alien world. Change, then, in this room full of diversity, was a unifying factor.

Later that afternoon, I spent the second half of my placement with another group of people entirely from within that same neighbourhood. Monday Group consists of some of the older and more vulnerable residents of Easton and meets in the basement of a block of flats. With the exception of one Afro-Caribbean lady who has lived here 52 years, the others are white and most have lived here all their very long lives. From their stories of wartime bombings and relocated communities, and the way they have adjusted to becoming a minority group in the streets of their birth, I was again struck by the sense of worlds changing and the human capacity to adapt. These people have seen their own world change in front of their eyes and have overcome the barriers of resentment and prejudice to an acceptance of, and even love for, their new neighbours.

In reflecting on these experiences, all of which encapsulate the image of a young mother with a small child within the context of her changing worlds, and the changing worlds around her, I began to see a pattern that I could recognise. I saw the form of a baby, with a young mother, born into a changing and volatile world. This baby had also crossed worlds for,

Though he was God,

He did not think of equality with God

as something to cling to.

Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;

He took the humble position of a slave

And was born as a human being.

(Phil 2:6,7 NLT)[1]

This Jesus crossed the barriers of earth and heaven to identify with his creation. He moved from the indescribable Life of heaven to live as a child on earth. He was born of a young mother, whose world was torn apart by his coming. His birth caused a genocide and his family became refugees, fleeing from a hostile regime. This Jesus knows what it is to cross into a foreign land, to live in poverty and insecurity; He knows what it is to return and live in one's own land, occupied by strangers. He knows what it is like to live in the midst of political turmoil and the threat of war, where insurgents could topple a fragile peace at any moment. This Jesus knows what it is to be Somali. This Jesus knows how it is to live in Easton.

The Power of Identification in Crossing Boundaries

In his book, *the Bible and Counselling*, Roger Hurding summarises the very practical themes that can be drawn from this reflection.

...Clearly, we see in the self-emptying of Christ, 'being made in human likeness' (Phil. 2:7), complete identification with the limitations and suffering of our humanity. Here was one who entered 'our frame of reference'... We, too, in the name of Christ and in the power of the Spirit, are called to enter in to the lives of others...At times this venture will feel a lonely one but, even in the bleakest place of human need, we are assured of the presence of God, who can identify with and reach the most bereft.[2]

Because of this deep identification with all of humanity, Jesus himself can speak to all peoples, all nations. We need not fear the irrelevance of our faith, even amongst people who are completely unlike us, because this God is a human God. He is the only man whose reach can stretch far enough to meet all people and bring them the hope of returning to God. He is the

only God who can enter in to our world and redeem it. For ‘ He is our Great High Priest, with ready access to God... We don’t have a priest who is out of touch with our reality... He’s been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin.’(Heb 4: 14-15, The Message)

Dorothy L Sayers, quoted by Yancey says:

He has Himself has gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death... He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile.[3]

But what of us? Jesus may have lived life in such a way that he is able to identify with the worst of human experience, but in comparison we are often constricted by inexperience and the sheer comfort of our lives. We fear those who are different; we fear to enter in to their worlds. We fear to tell them of our English God. How can we hope to convey our faith across boundaries, into different worlds?

As High Priest, Jesus brings together man and God - He is Lord of heaven and earth - and in this reflection I want to look at the ways in which we are called to follow him. How are we called to be priests to this world of such great diversity of lifestyle, opportunity and experience? How do we minister to people in the midst of change and in the liminal spaces of their lives?

It is my belief that we also are called to learn to traverse worlds as we follow the Lord who transcends culture. This sounds naïve, idealistic, impossible even, but there are some very simple ways in which we can begin practically.

Praxis

Perhaps first of all we need to recognise the God who is already there in our neighbourhoods and to recognise the ways in which He is at work already. We need to learn to see Emmanuel, God with us - and the God who is with them.

Secondly, we need to find ways of leaving our own comfort zones and entering in to those other worlds. We need to be willing to learn about others, about their lives and experiences, their hopes, dreams, fears and failures. We need the availability to listen, for it will change us as we discover the Living Christ in the encounter.

Thirdly, we need to set up places of hospitality that can accommodate the stranger in the borderlands of their lives and ours and to discover the opportunities for learning and growth that exist there. We need to find ways of welcoming others into our own world, our community and our faith.

There are some key qualities that are fundamental in the practical out workings of this calling.

Compassion: – According to Yancey, ‘The word ‘compassion’ comes from two Latin words that mean, “to suffer with”. Jesus showed compassion in the deepest sense... He suffered with us, and for us.’[\[4\]](#)

We do not need to suffer pain to experience compassion, but we do need to enter in to another’s world in some way. Being a listening presence, hearing someone else’s story can help them open their world to us. We will begin to feel with them, identify with them. More importantly we can begin to see where God might be present in their story.

Empathy: – I didn’t know the young mother who stood in that doorway, but I could identify with her in shared experience; I could empathise. Because I’ve been where she is I could also begin to know how to reach out and welcome her in.

Hospitality and Community: – Vanier writes a great deal about the value of vibrant Christian communities that draw people in,[\[5\]](#) but that is another reflection all of its own. Hospitality must be central to our message – the message of a God who makes himself at home in our world and invites us to become at home in His world, his Kingdom. We need to help people feel at home even amidst the chaos of change, to provide spaces for them to unwind, unfurl and learn to be, to become, in a strange land.

Finding Emmanuel; looking for Jesus: – Hospitality welcomes the stranger and invites them to become known. In doing so we invite ways of discovering Jesus in their lives, and they are invited to find Jesus in ours. We know from experience that there are times in our lives when we discover some part or aspect of ourselves in which Jesus has been present, even when we never knew He was there. It is at these times, when we find Jesus has been with us through disturbing and traumatic experiences, that we know that we can find healing. As Wiederkehr describes, ‘Not only do we come home to ourselves but we discover that the self we’ve come home to is a home for God... [We] cry out with new found awareness, “Truly God was in this place all the while and I never knew it.”’[\[6\]](#)

When, through patient listening and identification we begin to recognise where Jesus has been at home all along, in ourselves and others, we find that we lose our fear also to enter in. We may simply follow where He has been.

Looking for signs of the Kingdom: – Hurding observes, ‘Where we see Jesus mediating, reconciling, interceding, bringing forgiveness and identifying with fallen men and women, we meet the priestly aspect of pastoral care.’[\[7\]](#) We can find Jesus by looking for the people and places where His values are emulated. These are signs of His Presence and His Kingdom, even if these are expressed outside of the church.[\[8\]](#) Further, when we engage with these signs of the kingdom we are following our calling to be church and as a priesthood; we are bringing worlds

together.

[1] This passage is quoted as a poem because it forms part of a hymn in scripture.

[2] R. Hurding, *The Bible and Counselling* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), 107-8.

[3] P. Yancey, *When Life Hurts* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2004), 45.

[4] *Ibid.*, 41.

[5] This is the subject of Jean Vanier's book *Community and Growth* (2nd revised edition) (Dalton Longman & Todd, 1989), and also his poem, 'Two Worlds' In, *Followers of Jesus and Be Not Afraid* (combined volume) (Toronto: Griffin House, 1980) 3-4

[6] Wiederkehr, M., *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 7

[7] R. Hurding, *The Bible and Counselling* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), 82

[8] Following A. Morisy, *Beyond the Good Samaritan: Community Ministry and Mission* (Mowbray, 2001)



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I have just finished training as an independent ministerial student at Bristol Baptist College, but my calling has always been to those on the margins of society (however we may define margins!). I have worked for 12 years as project director for a small youth and community development charity in the Philippines, where I also lived for 4 years. Before that I worked in youth work and education, running a mentoring company for young people at risk of exclusion in mainstream schools. I am currently part of the UK coordination team for Servants to Asia's Urban Poor.