

“I have called you friends”: Women in Mission

Sydney, 16 May 2017

Introduction:

Mary Magdalene, the disciple in John’s Gospel who was the first to see Jesus after his resurrection stands as a beautiful image for me of what it means to be a woman in mission. In her life and faithful witness, she embodies some of the themes I would like to explore with you around mission.

As a disciple of Jesus, Mary has not received the same prominence as the male disciples yet she was the first to see Jesus. So often women have been, and are, hidden or even invisible in their engagement in mission. Mary was at the tomb early and saw that the stone had been removed. Mary remained after the other disciples left, weeping and looking for Jesus. Mary was steadfast and compassionate. Then Mary saw, heard and spoke with Jesus. She listened. Her friendship with Jesus, her hiddenness and also her witness to Jesus, her comforting of the other disciples by this witness, her listening to Jesus and her welcome and care for Jesus are some of the themes and practices I would like to explore.

This is not to say that these themes are not applicable for men, that men do not resonate with them, identify with them and indeed practise them. Rather, I hope that these practices and ideas will be helpful and challenging for all of us – both women and men – and so enable us to engage in mission more holistically.

I have expressed these as “A Missiology of...” which really means a concept which has mission at the heart of its approach to theology and life. By mission, I mean allowing people to experience the abundant and overflowing love of God through a relationship with Jesus so that each person can become fully and completely who God created them to be.

So here are my themes:

- A Missiology of Friendship and Hospitality
- A Missiology of Emptiness, Hiddenness and Weeping
- A Missiology of Comforting, Consolation and Healing
- A Missiology of Seeing and Listening

1. A Missiology of Friendship and Hospitality

In preparation for this address, I interviewed several women engaged in mission all over the world and the first question I asked them was: “Do you think women have a different approach to mission from men? If so, how?” Every single one of them spoke of the importance of friendship and relationships. They spoke of women nurturing relationships, coming alongside others to build and strengthen friendships, being present, sharing stories of life and family together. Friendship encourages trust, intimacy and community. Jesus paints a beautiful picture of friendship with his disciples where he asserts that they are no longer to be called servants but instead he claims, “I have called you friends, for everything I have learned from my Father, I have made known to you.” (John 15:15b). This is quite an extraordinary claim – the level of sharing, trust and intimacy that Jesus reveals here.

Friendship is such an attractive idea for mission because it exhibits mutuality and helps both of us to grow. Friendship implies reciprocity, mutual respect and valuing spending time together. As Christine Pohl writes in her excellent book *Friendship at the Margins*, “Friendship as a model for mission recognises the importance of sharing ourselves and cultivating trust.”¹ I recently read Sam Wells’ latest book, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, where he writes that the most important word in theology is the word ‘with’ – Emmanuel – God WITH us. He explains that the story of Scripture is the

¹ Christopher Heuertz and Christine Pohl. *Friendship at the Margins Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission*, (Downers Grove:IVP, 2010), 102-3.

story of God's desire to be with us; not to do things FOR us, not to patronise us but to be WITH us. Pohl notes that “the other person is not seen as a project or a needy recipient but as a fellow traveller.”² Many of the women I interviewed spoke of this. One said, “much of what women do is less project driven... my work was a lot about time, drinking tea, talking, life’s celebrations, creating celebrations, advocating with families. So friendship, taking time, advocating, celebrating, being together leads us to my next theme of hospitality.

Israel experienced God as a God of Hospitality. Stories of hospitality are foundational to their very existence and identity. These stories of hospitality contain themes and tensions which resonate through the centuries – stories of hospitality received and hospitality abused. Christine Pohl reminds us in her superb book on hospitality, *Making Room, Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, “The first formative story of the biblical tradition on hospitality is unambiguously positive about welcoming strangers.”³ Hospitality was considered an important duty and often we see the hosts becoming beneficiaries of their guests and strangers. So Abraham and Sarah entertained angels in Gen 18, the widow of Zarephath benefited from Elijah’s visit (I Kings 17) and Rahab and her family were saved from death by welcoming Joshua’s spies. (Josh 2) Ultimately Israel’s obligation to care for the stranger is because of her experience as a stranger and alien. Most of the ancient world regarded hospitality as a fundamental virtue and practice, holy ground in fact, as do many cultures still in our world today.

Feasting

² Ibid., 102.

³ C Pohl, *Making Room, Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 24.

Pohl writes, “the table is central to the practice of hospitality in home and church – the nourishment we gain there is physical, spiritual and social.”⁴ The theme of banqueting, of food and drink is central in the ministry of Jesus. Was he not accused of being a glutton and a drunkard and of eating with sinners? Jesus was celebrating the messianic banquet but with all the wrong people! Luke Bretherton even goes so far as to state that “This table fellowship with sinners, and the reconfiguring of Israel’s purity boundaries which this hospitality represents signifies the heart of Jesus’ mission.”⁵ Jesus and his followers here are also celebrating the abundance of God – think of all the stories of food and drink overflowing, of parties and celebrations enjoyed, of the feeding of the 5,000. God’s household is a household of superabundance, of extravagant hospitality, where food and wine is generously shared and the divine welcome universally offered. Jesus’ rejection of social and religious categories of inclusion and exclusion was offensive to the authorities. As one theologian expressed it, “Jesus got himself crucified by the way he ate.”⁶

Moreover, eating together is a great leveller. It is something that we all must do so it has a profoundly egalitarian dimension. Jean Vanier of the *l’Arche* community confessed that when he started to share meals with men who had serious mental disabilities, “Sitting down at the same table meant becoming friends with them, creating a family. It was a way of life absolutely opposed to the values of a competitive, hierarchical society in which the weak are pushed aside.”⁷ When we eat together, as we let down our guard and share stories, we begin to create relationship and this is at the heart of mission – our relationship with God and neighbour. In a unique moment in the book of Ephesians, we see Jews and Gentiles coming together. The test of their coming together was the meal table – the

⁴ Ibid., 158.

⁵ L Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness, Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity*, (Hants:Ashgate, 2006), 128.

⁶ Robert J Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian* (NY:Paulist Press, 1985), 47.

⁷ Pohl, *Making Room*, 74.

institution that once symbolised ethnic and cultural division now became a symbol of Christian living.⁸ This is indeed a strong statement about the power of eating together.

This understanding of hospitality is perhaps most powerfully expressed in the Eucharist, where this ritualised eating and drinking together re-enacts the crux of the gospel. As we remember what it cost Jesus to welcome us into relationship with God, we remember with sorrow the agony and the pain but at the same time we rejoice and celebrate our reconciliation and this new relationship made possible because of Christ's sacrifice and supreme act of hospitality. We rejoice in our new relationship with God, made possible through the Cross and we rejoice as we partake of this meal together in community. When we share in the Eucharist, we are not only foreshadowing the great heavenly banquet to come but we are also nourished on our journey towards God's banquet table. Jesus is, quite literally, the Host as we partake of His body and blood and we are the guests as we feed on him. In this way, the Eucharist connects hospitality at a very basic level with God and with mission as it anticipates and reveals God's heavenly table and the coming Kingdom.

Welcome of the Stranger

Jesus is portrayed as a gracious host, welcoming children, tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners into his presence and therefore offending those who would prefer such guests not to be at His gatherings. But Jesus is also portrayed as vulnerable guest and needy stranger who came to his own but his own did not receive him. (Jn 1:11) Pohl comments that this "intermingling of guest and host roles in the person of Jesus is part of what makes the story of hospitality so compelling for Christians."⁹ Think

⁸ See E Katangole, "Mission and the Ephesian Moment of World Christianity: Pilgrimages of Pain and Hope and the Economics of Eating Together", *Mission Studies*, Vol 29, No2, 2012, 183-201.

⁹ Pohl, *Making Room*, 17.

of Jesus on the Emmaus Rd as travelling pilgrim and stranger, recognised as host and who he was in the breaking of bread during a meal involving an act of hospitality. Or think of the Peter and Cornelius story (interestingly, another story involving varieties of food) – who is the host and who is the guest? Both offer and receive, both listen and learn, both are challenged and changed by the hospitality of the other. So we can see the importance of not only the ambiguity but also the fluidity of the host/guest conundrum. We offer and receive as both guest or stranger and host.

This intermingling and fluidity is vital for us to understand. Jesus modelled powerlessness and vulnerability by being a guest in our world, by letting go and being among us in our place and space. This radically changes the power dynamics. So often in mission, the receiving person or culture is seen as needy, vulnerable, in need of help. We have to turn this on its head. We need to be in relationship with them and learn to see the resources and spirituality inherent in that community and context. Jean Vanier reminds us of this. He writes, 'it will take decades to see all the consequences of listening to the least powerful among us and allowing ourselves to be led by them.'¹⁰ Vanier again,

Befriending a person with a disability or alcoholism isn't going to provide an instant solution to their difficulties. But this friendship can lead to a mutual transformation by touching the place where God lives in each one of us. We can then begin to work with people who are fragile instead of simply for them.¹¹

Then there will be a mutually transformative encounter where hospitality and friendship are offered and received in a reciprocal manner.

¹⁰ J Vanier, *Signs of the Times, Seven Paths of Hope for a Troubled World*, (London:DLT,2013), 10

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

Hospitality is subversive because it undermines and challenges existing power structures and restores human dignity and respect. Jesus reinforces this in the two great texts of Lk 14 and Mt 25 where he distinguishes between conventional and Christian hospitality. In Lk 14 Jesus says,

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, brothers, sisters, relatives or your rich neighbours, if you do they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Lk 14:12-14)

This is, of course, the prelude to the parable of the Great Banquet which immediately follows these two verses, a powerful metaphor for the Kingdom of God, where all are universally welcomed. When the expected guests turn down the invitation to the banquet; the same four groups are to be invited, “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” and then everyone else from the highways and byways. And in Mt 25 Jesus explicitly identifies himself with the stranger. Here, God’s invitation into the Kingdom of God is clearly linked to Christian hospitality in this life. This has been a key passage in the entire Christian tradition of hospitality.

So friendship and hospitality are key ideas and practices for mission. We have seen that Jesus was friends with all the wrong people – tax collectors, sinners, women, children, the marginalised, the little ones. Jesus loves those who are the most vulnerable. And this is what He offers us – friendship as a “surprisingly subversive missional paradigm”¹² so that we can love whom He loves. It also recalls the passionate and heartfelt plea of a young Anglican Indian, V. S. Azariah at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. Speaking to the missionaries present, he lamented,

¹² Heuertz and Pohl, *Friendship*, 30.

Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for *love*. Give us FRIENDS!¹³

2. A Missiology of Emptiness, Hiddenness and Weeping

A missiology of emptiness was first suggested by Korean woman missiologist, Chun Chae Ok in 2004.¹⁴ I believe that this resonates with much of women's engagement in and experience of mission. A missiology of emptiness is about emptying self to the point of self-sacrifice. It is about *kenosis* as expressed in Phil 2:5-11.

For women, their involvement in mission is often experienced from this point of weakness, sacrifice and invisibility. Historically we know that women have been deeply engaged in the work of mission, but because women were seen as adjuncts to men, they were "systematically written out of historical and anthropological records."¹⁵ In fact missionary was a male noun – "it denoted a male actor, male action, male spheres of service."¹⁶ Throughout the history of mission, women have often been nameless and faceless. The early CMS records sometimes did not even note the name of the wife – merely according her a little 'm' to denote that the male missionary was married. Young Lee Hertig entitled her article on 19th century Bible women and 20th century evangelists in Korea, "Without a Face" because they

¹³ Quoted in Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 125.

¹⁴ Chun Chae Ok "Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel: Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: An Asian Perspective" Unpublished paper, 11th conference of the International Association for Mission Studies, Port Dickson, Malaysia, August, 2004.

¹⁵ Fiona Bowie, "Introduction: Reclaiming Women's Presence," in *Women and Missions: Past and Present Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Fiona Bowie, Deborah Kirkwood, and Shirley Ardener (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

remained “invisible and faceless.”¹⁷ Yet despite this, they “carried the gospel from house to house and were sacrificially devoted to their labour of love.”¹⁸ She claims that once the church began to become institutionalised, “masculinization of the Korean church took place, and the hard labour of the Bible women remained invisible and faceless. Patriarchal leadership took over and continued to harvest the Bible women’s work with women’s labour credited to male leadership.”¹⁹

A number of the women I interviewed, identified this approach as central to their experience. One Australian woman wrote,

It’s where we so often start our life experience – particularly as women living cross-culturally, when we encounter cultures where women are differentially valued. We live out the self-emptying: and must choose how we live it out, whether redemptively or destructively.²⁰

This choice of how women live it out is vital. Otherwise this *kenotic* approach can be used against women – as we have seen historically and as one of the interviewees responded, “I definitely think women have been encouraged to stay hidden and the *kenosis* of Christ has been used to justify this by a patriarchal church.”²¹ Frances Adeney, in her wonderful book, *Women and Christian Mission, Ways of Knowing and Doing Theology* reminds us that “this is a theology that presents much ambiguity for women since the idea of self-sacrifice can be used in oppressive ways. It then becomes not a source of holy living but an obstacle to be overcome.”²²

¹⁷ Young Lee Hertig, “Without a Face, The Nineteenth Century Biblewomen and Twentieth Century *Jeondosa*” in D Robert (ed), *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers, Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century*, (Maryknoll:Orbis, 2002)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁹ Young Lee Hertig, “Without a Face” in D Robert (ed) *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers*, (Maryknoll:Orbis, 2002), 186.

²⁰ Email from Woman 5, 29 March 2017

²¹ Email from Woman 1, 13 March 2017.

²² Frances Adeney,, *Women and Christian Mission, Ways of Knowing and Doing Theology*, (Oregon:Pickwick, 2015), 25.

Certainly, we have seen this ambiguity and oppression of women, under the guise of women's self-sacrifice and service throughout history and more recently. Marilu Salazar reminds us of the invisibility of women in Latin America in the Roman Catholic context. She quotes Brazilian theologian, Ivone Gebara whose critique of the Latin American Conference of Bishops, held in Aparecida in 2007, was, "we women were the great disappeared ones in Aparecida."²³ The official documents from the conference made no mention of indigenous women, religious women, feminist theology, nor women's organisations "that in Latin America have dedicated their labours to fight against the different faces of violence and to offer alternatives of survival."²⁴ Atola Longkumer, from India, claims that "discrimination, exclusion, marginalisation and even violence" exist within the church.²⁵ She explains how a lack of gender analysis has led to a truncated understanding of the gospel so that an equal Christian community has not been created. This has led to "a position and participatory power that is not very different from the pre-Christian mission days for the Ao women despite education and Christianisation."²⁶ This does beg the obvious question as to why Christian mission did not seem to challenge cultural practices that were discriminatory or harmful towards women.

The kind of work often performed by women – hospitality, visiting, counselling, ministries of compassion and children's work has tended to be seen as secondary to the primary tasks performed by men.

Women evangelists, women deacons, mothers and daughters are the ones who most of the time, give their total service for the faith community and its neighbours in visiting, in prayers, in counselling and in a variety of aids. ..

²³ M Salazar, "Education and Violence: A Reflection from the Perspective of Latin American Feminist Theology of Liberation", Unpublished paper, "Women in Mission", Bossey workshop, 15-18 October, 2010.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ A Longkumer, "Tetsur Tesayula: The limits for women in the Ao Naga Christians in Northeast India", Unpublished paper, "Women in Mission", Bossey workshop, 15-18 October, 2010.

²⁶ Ibid.

Women's witness with the gospel to the world is carried out in weakness and selflessness.²⁷

This approach also speaks of the ability to identify with and support the brokenness of our world. One interviewee said, "It captures for me something of the way God came and walked among us, and calls us to walk in a broken world."²⁸ Another wrote,

This speaks to me of being real, broken, showing our hurts and pains to one another. Being real as we walk lives together, sharing doubts and pain along with faith and hope. Hiddenness speaks to me of seeking out the good which others might not see - seeing the potential in people. This also reflects to me going into places where people feel broken, empty, hurting, unseen, unrecognised and incarnating Christ... the one who seeks, finds, heals, redeems and celebrates.²⁹

Women are familiar with approaches that are hidden, less recognised and rarely celebrated. We need to recover these perspectives in our missiology. After all, this was the approach of Jesus in his ministry where he emptied himself for the sake of others, where he sometimes even asked people to keep his healing miracles secret, where he declared that the first would be last, and told his disciples that we all need to take up our cross to follow him.

All this injustice and brokenness may cause us to weep, along with Mary in the garden, – sometimes there is no other response. Pope Francis reminds us of the importance of tears. In his morning meditation on 13 September 2013, he reflected:

We can grasp something of the mystery of the Cross on our knees in prayer and in tears as well. Indeed tears actually bring us close to this mystery.

²⁷ Chun Chae Ok, "Integrity of Mission"

²⁸ Email from Woman 4, 28 March 2017.

²⁹ Email from Woman 3, 21 March 2017.

Without shedding tears, and especially without heartfelt tears, we shall never understand this mystery. It is the weeping of the penitent, the weeping of our brother and sister who see so many human miseries and likewise see them in Jesus, on his knees weeping.³⁰

We need a kneeling theology, a weeping theology; a theology that understands not only our own vulnerability and brokenness but also the vulnerability and brokenness of God's world.

3. A Missiology of Comforting, Consolation and Healing

A missiology of comforting draws from the power of the Holy Spirit to comfort, transform and heal – both humanity and creation. The Holy Spirit, also known as the Comforter, is the one who comforts the broken, the afflicted, the suffering. God is a God of consolation who is with the HIV/AIDs sufferers, the abused women, the victims of Hiroshima or Rwanda or Syria or Congo, the victims of war. Women and children are the main victims of war and violence. Women struggle on to feed and protect their families, to live in reconciliation and peace, to bind up the wounded, to heal the broken-hearted.

Women, as mothers, are always comforting their children. Kenyan theologian, Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike writes that

Africa today needs a mother's love. African women as mothers have sustained and continued to nurture the life in Africa despite the ethnic wars, the military dictatorships, oppressive governments and economic hardships which deprive many people of basic necessities...The woman of Africa has

³⁰ Cited in Clemens Sedmak, *A Church of the Poor, Pope Francis and the Transformation of Orthodoxy*, (Maryknoll:Orbis, 2016), 70.

given her life for the love of her children but the man of Africa must join hands with women of Africa and follow the example of Jesus the mother.³¹

Mission is comforting – bringing comfort to humanity in distress and to creation in distress. A good example is found in a Mother’s Union (MU) group in Tanzania. The MU was founded in England in 1876 by Mary Sumner and now exists in 83 countries with over 4 million members worldwide. It works to support family life and empower women in their communities through supporting the needs of families, tackling the causes of injustice and providing a network to strengthen members in their Christian faith. “Heart and home of change” is the metaphor used by a group in Tanzania to speak of hospitality offered, widows and children being cared for, craftwork projects, prayers being offered, joys and sorrows shared, community development embodied. This group of women provide powerful, practical comforting, consolation and sustenance for their community, “the affirmed fellowship of love, the women who support you to leave an abusive husband and work to provide you with a house of your own, the receipt of needed food, the new family after losing your own.”³² Where women experience brokenness in so many ways – whether it is increasing family breakdown in the West, rape as an instrument of war to terrorise and humiliate women and whole communities, or the daily grind of facing gender discrimination or racist structures in the workplace, mission carried out in the way of this Tanzanian MU group can offer healing and grace to broken and scarred women.³³ The MU is a ministry that uses women’s space for consolation, healing, transformation, and empowerment. This group enables women to rise above victimhood and to reclaim their self-esteem.

³¹ Quoted in D Stinton, *Jesus of Africa, Voices of Contemporary African Christology*, (Maryknoll:Orbis, 2004), 157.

³² E. Sanderson “Women changing: Relating spirituality and development through the wisdom of Mothers’ Union members in Tanzania” *Women’s Studies Journal*, Vol. 20, No.2, (2006):95.

³³ See Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology, Cartographies of Grace*, (Augsburg:Fortress, 2000), 94-125.

You are probably aware of Pope Francis' vision of the church as a field hospital bringing healing at the "frontiers". In an interview in 2013 with Italian Jesuit, Fr Antonio Spadaro, he said:

It is useless to ask a seriously injured person whether they have high cholesterol or about the level of his blood sugars. You have to heal his wounds. Then you can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds... and you have to start from the ground up.³⁴

So, in mission, we start with healing the wounds – and it might well be our own wounds - bringing comfort and consolation, opening up a fresh vision of what it means to be human, offering the good news of love, mercy and forgiveness.

4. A Missiology of Seeing and Listening

To engage in mission we need the gift of sight and insight. These are gifts of the Holy Spirit as +John Taylor reminds us. The Holy Spirit is the "Go-Between God" who opens our inward eyes and makes us aware of the other. "The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality."³⁵

The concept of sight and recognition of the other are clear in the Parable in Mt 25 when the righteous say to Jesus, "Lord when did we *see* you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we *see* you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we *see* you sick or in prison and go and visit you?" (Mt 25:37-9) And we all know Jesus' answer. Here again we experience subversion, a reversal of expected values and practices. When we do what Jesus commended in Mt 25 – visit those in prison, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, entertain the stranger – we are living out a very different set of values and

³⁴ Cited in Emmanuel Katongole, "Field Hospital: HEAL Africa and the politics of compassion in Eastern Congo", *Missiology*, 2017, Vol 45 (1); 26.

³⁵ J V Taylor, *The Go-Between God, The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, (London:SCM, 1972), 19.

relationships. We are according dignity to others, we are breaking social boundaries, we are including those who are so often excluded; we are engaged in transformation.

It begins with seeing the other person; the act of recognition – a powerful act indeed. Looking the other in the eye – the establishment of the ‘I-Thou’ relationship is a fundamental act of hospitality because it acknowledges people’s humanity, accords them dignity and denies their invisibility. As Pohl says, “Hospitality resists boundaries that endanger persons by denying their humanness. It saves others from the invisibility that comes from social abandonment. Sometimes, by the very act of welcome, a vision for a whole society is offered, a small evidence that transformed relations are possible.”³⁶ Think of the Good Samaritan who refused to pass by or pretend that he had not *seen* the wounded man. His act of hospitality crossed ethnic boundaries, caused him personal cost and inconvenience and saved a life. When we see the other person, we see the image of God, as well as our common humanity, which establishes a fundamental dignity, respect and common bond. The parable in Mt 25 reminds us that we can *see* Christ in every guest and stranger. What might it be like if this basic human condition of sight were not possible? It might, in fact, be hell. “Abbas Macarios, a desert father had a vision of hell as a state where it is not possible to see anyone face to face; the face of one suffering person is fixed to the back of another suffering person.” So hell has been described as “[A] state of ‘facelessness’ a state lacking direct, personal encounter.”³⁷

If we had been able to “see the other” might the genocide in Rwanda or Cambodia never have happened? If we were able “to see the other” might the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the civil war in N Ireland, the ignorance and apathy concerning Sudan and Congo, *apartheid* in South Africa, the massacres of Aborigine

³⁶ Pohl, *Making Room*, 64.

³⁷ Sedmak, *A Church of the Poor*, 172.

tribes, tribalism, caste and class systems, oppressive colonialism – might all this have been avoided – if only we could see? Who are we blind to in our contexts, which prevents us from seeing the other person and, wittingly or unwittingly, means that we practise a theology of exclusion rather than of embrace? Might it be the Dalit, the untouchable, the Aborigine, the homeless person whom we have never noticed before, whom we have never seen before, whom we have always passed by in the street and never looked in the eye nor exchanged a greeting. Might it be the older women in our congregations, who always faithfully provide the food, clean the church, arrange the flowers – have we ever taken the time to “see” them and to thank them? Might it be the young people whose music is so loud, whose language is incomprehensible, whose body-piercing and head shaving is so alien – have we ever stopped to look them in the eye, to appreciate their music, to consider the pressures they may be under – the bleak prospect of unemployment, broken homes, student loans, an uncertain future – have we ever stopped to look them in the eye and tried to understand them in their context? Might it be those migrants who never learn our language, who never even try to integrate, who take over whole streets and suburbs in our cities – have we ever had them in our homes, offered them hospitality and tried to “see” their culture? In humility, let us ask ourselves whom the Holy Spirit might be calling us “to see.”

Finally - listening. (what you have been doing for me so far!) “It’s surprising what you hear when you listen.”³⁸ So often, people experience marginalisation because they are not heard. They, their stories, their history, their culture and context are neither heard nor preserved. The history of Christian mission is littered with such stories and experiences. I am sure you are aware of that here with your own particular history and settlement. My own country of Aotearoa/New Zealand is still

³⁸ This is the by-line for the BBC Listening Project the aim of which is to “capture the nation in conversation to build a unique picture of our lives today and preserve it for future generations.” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01cq3b>, accessed 12.04.2017

struggling with the legacy of not listening to the local culture and context. Part of this legacy has meant that land was stolen by early settlers and promises to local Māori were not honoured.

Listening is an act of love. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*, “Just as love of God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for others is learning to listen to them...”³⁹ Paul Tillich wrote, “In order to know what is just in a person-to-person encounter, love listens. It is its first task to listen. Listening love is the first step to justice in person-to-person encounters.”⁴⁰

Listening can be a means of grace, it can elicit stories and enable others to find their voice. Importantly, the power to speak is integrally related to the power to change. A good example of this is African American civil rights activist Ella Baker’s famed teaching and organising methodology which some referred to as ‘mothering.’ One of her daughters explained, “She also led you by the way she listened and questioned. In her presence you got the feeling that what you felt inside made sense and could be offered up to the group for discussion as policy or strategy.”⁴¹ So listening can become a way to empower or enable less visible or powerful people to be heard. It is indeed an act of love. Attentive listening allows others to be heard, known and understood. By letting go and listening attentively, others can be heard into speech, stories can be told which can begin to give voice to feelings, emotions, desires – this can be transformative for those who have never been listened to, who have never been able to articulate their own stories. Listening to the other, and the sharing of stories is the beginning of understanding and of entering into the other’s world. Telling stories and being heard are part of what it means to be human.

³⁹ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice, An Introduction*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 144

⁴⁰ P Tillich in M Warren, *Partnership The Study of an Idea*, (London: SCM, 1956), 14.

⁴¹ Moschella, *Ethnography*, 151.

Listening may indeed be the first act of mission.

Conclusion

So let us go back to the empty tomb with Mary. Jesus commissions Mary to announce to the disciples that the work of the Word made flesh is accomplished. Her encounter with the risen Jesus was transformative – just as ours is today. This encounter transforms our lives to become children of God, brothers and sisters, friends of Jesus. So Mary is a wonderful model for us in mission. As we engage in mission, whether that is through weeping with the broken-hearted, consoling the bereaved, bringing healing and comfort to those who are hurting or whether it is through surprising and unexpected friendships, or through parties and celebrations and feasts, or through hearing silent ones into speech, may we too rediscover the joy of the Gospel as we deepen our love for and friendship with Jesus.