

WHERE'S THE PASSION

CHRISTOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS
ON MISSION IN THE MARGINS

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WHERE'S THE PASSION? CHRISTOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON MISSION IN THE MARGINS

Breakin' up in my front yard
So you may shoot me with your words
You may cut me with your eyes
And I'll rise, I'll rise, I'll rise

Out of the shacks of history's shame
Up from a past rooted in pain
I'll rise, I'll rise, I'll rise'

POVERTY OF IDENTITY?

Something about that passion play seemed to resonate deeply with the collective story of the Firs and Bromford estate, among Christians and non-Christians alike. From its utopian beginnings, as a green and spacious paradise for those who had previously lived in inner-city Birmingham's "back-to-back" terraces, much of the estate's history has been one of being overlooked, let down, and abandoned. Overlooked quite literally, by those who drive up and down the M6, and more metaphorically, for example, when a multi-million pound regeneration investment went to the neighbouring Castle Vale estate. Let down, often, by organisations coming in promising the earth, and then promptly leaving when their funding ran out. Abandoned, repeatedly, as over the years employment opportunities in local firms (mostly heavy industry, like the Jaguar factory and Fort Dunlop, just across the motorway) have been pared to the bone, while the local Council, even before the post-2010 government austerity regime, has gradually withdrawn neighbourhood offices, place-based officers, and community facilities from the estate. At the same time, rapid demographic change with the growth of Somali, Nigerian, Romanian and other recently-arrived communities, has left many local people with a sense of living "parallel lives": side-by-side in their homes on the street, but rarely coming face-to-face.

In the language of the Church Urban Fund's "web of poverty", residents of the Firs and Bromford have experienced not just a poverty of resources (financial, educational and health, among others), and of relationships (the CUF report names fear of crime, isolation, family breakdown, and lack of trust in others), but also a poverty of identity. Whereas in CUF's report that is understood mostly in individual terms (poor mental health, lack of wellbeing and self-worth), however, I would want to highlight also a communal dimension. Wider discourse, among politicians and media commentators, about estates like ours rarely portrays

Abstract: In the face of the 'web of poverty' in socio-economically marginal places, Christian missional pioneers are often tempted to 'heroic' expressions in the name of love. Jesus' own resistance to those temptations, and Mark's subversions of Jesus' own 'heroic' narrative, offer us a model for 'giving up activism', in able to receive the transforming gifts and challenges of our neighbours

IN "THE WASTELAND"

In one corner of the Firs and Bromford estate where I live and work, almost underneath the M6 motorway as it stretches on stilts away from Spaghetti Junction, is what we locals call "the wasteland". In the 1960s, Birmingham City Council built three tower blocks on the land, which instantly started sinking into the mud – it was, and still is, a flood plain. The tower blocks demolished in the 1990s, the land has been abandoned ever since, even though many local people walk through it every day to get to shops and schools.

One wintry April afternoon in 2013, framed by the concrete pillars that support the motorway, we crucified Jesus, in the very first Bromford Community Passion Play, an initiative not from the church, but from one of our passionate and gifted neighbours. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me," cried the dying man. Finally, out of the silence that followed the crucifixion, these defiant words of Maya Angelou sang out:

Now did you want to see me broken
Bowed head and lowered eyes
Shoulders fallen down like tear drops
Weakened by my soulful cries

Does my confidence upset you
Don't you take it awful hard
Cause I walk like I've got a diamond mine

¹ Ben Harper, 'I'll Rise' (1994), from the album Welcome to the Cruel World. Original words by Maya Angelou, 'Still I Rise', in And Still I Rise (New York: Random House, 1978).

them other than with crushing negativity: as “sink estates mired in welfare dependency, drug abuse and a culture of joblessness”, to take just one example.²

As sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant have noted, such descriptions inflict “symbolic violence” on those they describe, a violence which is internalised within those who are subjected to it.³

THE TEMPTATIONS OF THE “PIONEER”

How, then, might a local church engaged in “pioneering” mission respond? An obvious step would be for church-run initiatives and projects to seek to “fill the gap” in service-provision left by the retreat of the state, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, in the spirit of Matthew 25:

“for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matt 25:35-36)

Another common theological justification for the same practical response might be to ask ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ – or, if we prefer more ‘incarnational’ language, we might perhaps lean towards Teresa of Avila’s words:

“Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks in compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.”⁴

What is striking about both of these well-used christological rationales is that, whether they identify the Christian or the neighbour with Jesus Christ, it is the Christian, and not the neighbour, who is engaged in activity. Our neighbour, on the other hand, is imagined, explicitly or implicitly, as passive, receptive, “in need” – reinforcing precisely the kind of descriptions that have inflicted symbolic violence on estates like ours, in the words and actions of powerful outsiders.

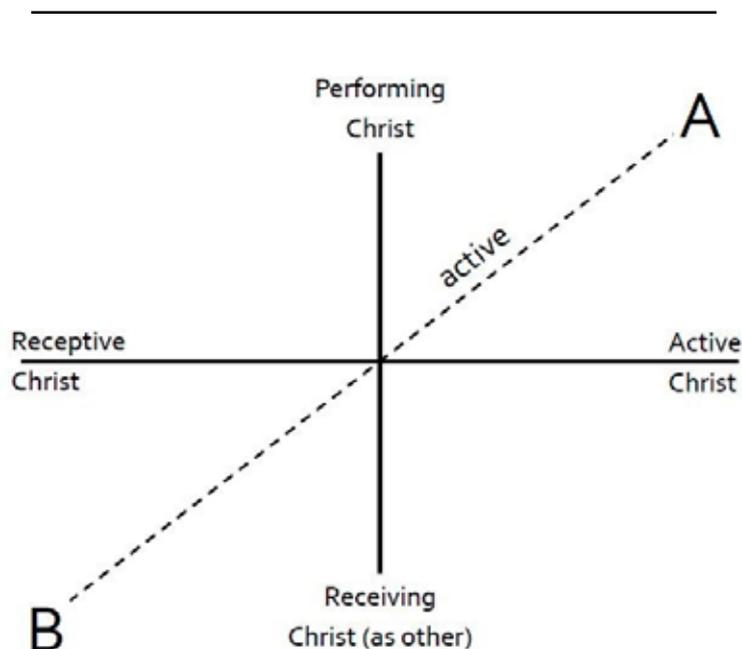


Fig 1 An ‘active’ christological axis:

A = ‘What would Jesus do?’ / ‘Christ has no body but ours...’ (Teresa of Avila)

B = ‘I was hungry and you fed me, a stranger and you welcomed me’ (Matt 25)

Bishop John V Taylor, in his *The Christlike God*, links precisely this temptation to those faced by Jesus in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-11): temptations to “the power of the provider” (“Tell these stones to become bread”), “the power of the possessor” (“I will give you all the kingdoms of the world”), and “the power of the performer” (“Throw yourself down from the parapet of the temple”). None of these kinds of power is essentially evil, Taylor argues, but they are all seductive, and that seduction can quickly corrupt. The power of the provider can make us feel good about our generosity, at the expense of the self-respect of those on the receiving end. The power of the possessor can quickly slide into a control-freakery that imagines it always knows best, always has to be in the driving seat, always has to be the one taking the initiative. And the power of the performer can become an obsession with being seen and heard, being “successful” and convincing others of your significance.⁵

² An Independent leader column in 2008, quoted in Kjartan Sveinsson, ‘Introduction’, in Kjartan Sveinsson (ed.), *Who Cares About the White Working Class?* (London: Runnymede Trust, 2009), 4.

³ Pierre Bourdieu & Loic Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 167, quoted in Lisa McKenzie, *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 8.

⁴ Teresa of Avila, quoted in Ian S Markham & Oran E Warder, *An introduction to ministry: a primer for renewed life and leadership in mainline protestant congregations* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2016), 124, in a section entitled ‘The Christological Basis of Pastoral Care’.

⁵ John V Taylor, *The Christlike God* (London: SCM, 1992), 261ff.

All three temptations readily find concrete examples in my experience as a minister seeking to re-engage the local church with a multiply-impooverished outer estate. The inequalities exacerbated by austerity can make “the power of the provider” a seductive calling – but what are we saying to our neighbours if our primary relationship with them is one where “we” are giving and “they” are receiving? For largely middle-class Christians (and perhaps Anglican vicars especially), having “a place at the table” at neighbourhood meetings, chairing committees, running projects – “the power of the possessor” – all of these can often go without saying as part and parcel of the church’s role within a neighbourhood, but what are we saying about our confidence in our neighbours’ abilities to make decisions, develop initiatives, take the lead? And finally, is “the power of the performer” perhaps the most pressing temptation of those of us who get labelled “pioneer” ministers – a pressure coming less from our neighbours, than from the church structures of which we are a part, with their strategic prioritising of “going for growth”, developing “fresh expressions” and “new initiatives”, and requiring us all to both measure and demonstrate our “impact” on a regular basis?

Jesus’ temptations are rooted in a questioning of his identity (“If you are the Son of God...”) – an identity that had been so clearly spoken to him in his baptism just days before (Matt 3:16-17). There may well be multiple reasons (at personal, local and national/institutional levels) behind our own anxieties and insecurities of identity, but when we are seduced by the temptations to power, it is the image of God in our neighbours that is eclipsed, as well as in ourselves.

MISSION AFTER COLONIALISM?

“To missionize is to colonize and to colonize is to missionize.”⁶ The link between the two, dating back at least to the conquest of the Americas, has been well documented in mission studies.⁷ But even though Christian mission thinking has largely recognized and renounced its colonialist past, Joerg Rieger argues, it does not always see its risk of entanglement with a present-day neocolonialism – as much, if not more so, a pernicious way of thinking (and therefore of relating to others) as it is a visible, structural arrangement of power. “We know what is right for the world”, is the neocolonial motto, and it is subtly embedded in global financial

networks, political projects, and culture-shaping media corporations. Rieger’s analysis of neocolonial attitudes is largely focused on the international level, but it is, I would suggest, no less relevant for a local missiology on a Birmingham outer estate. I introduce his thinking here, before grounding it in my local context.

Mission as Outreach

Identifying mission as “an ‘outreach’ activity of the church” is, says Rieger, “a huge improvement over the common self-centredness of the church. It takes into account the fact that the church does not exist for itself, [but] ... needs to go out into the world” – with both words and actions. Asking “What can we do?” rather than “What is going on?”, however, usually leaves “the missionized ... on the receiving end” and “the uneven distribution of wealth of the neocolonialist system” unchallenged. Even “learning about the perceived needs of the other” rarely gets as far as asking the question “How might we be part of the problem?” Rieger argues. Mission as outreach is ultimately service not to our neighbours, but to the system itself:

“[a]s long as we are preoccupied with helping others – with all the temptations of trying to shape them in our own neo-colonial image and make them conform to our world – we will not raise nosy questions about ourselves. As long as we continue to celebrate our own generosity, nothing can really challenge us”.⁸

Mission as Relationship

If mission as outreach is “a one-way street”, much recent missiological work has emphasised mission as relationship as an alternative which allows for a greater mutuality between missionaries and “the missionized”. It might be easy, over-reacting against the outreach model, to fall into the opposite extreme of distanced indifference, Rieger suggests. “Mission as relationship recognizes that we are all connected” and that we cannot simply “leave people to themselves”. But when much talk of “mission as relationship” rejoices in the “enrichment” that can come from engaging with and learning from our “others”, we should be cautious about a metaphor, Rieger argues, that “has undertones of economic gain that are not unfamiliar in neocolonialism”. Asymmetries of power in such relationships often remain in place, or are even reinforced in the encounter. It is not that we do not mean well, says Rieger.

⁶ German Roman Catholic missiologist J Schmidlin writing in 1913, quoted in Joerg Rieger, “Theology and Mission Between Neocolonialism and Postcolonialism”, *Mission Studies* 21:2 (2004), 201-226.

⁷ See e.g. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

⁸ Rieger, “Theology and Mission”, 212-5

“Just the opposite: because we do mean so well, because we really want to see the other as equal, we often fail to give an account of the deeper inequalities and differentials in power”.

Even behind much “empowerment-talk” (“It is better to teach people to fish than to give them fish”, for example) lies the assumption that “those of us who have the power [or expertise, or authority] can pass it on to the people in need of it”. What if there is a power, an expertise, an authority, that has been in their hands all along?”

Mission as “Inreach”

What is needed, Rieger argues, is more than mere reference to the *missio Dei* – to what God is doing beyond what we are doing. Even that can be “pulled into the neocolonial force field: God can be claimed for almost anything”. We need to undergo “a radical reversal”: rather than seeking “to bring something to others”, the first task of those who consider themselves to be in mission is “to give up control, to commit things to God, and (as a result) to leave things in the hands of those to which the mission is directed”. “[A]s a reversal of power takes place, a reversal of authority happens as well”, and this “forces us to take a deeper look at ourselves”, “to reflect on how we have come to be (and still are) part of the problem” before we can even contemplate becoming “part of the solution”. We need “mission as inreach”, as Rieger calls it, “in order to inform us about where we are and about the invisible ‘principalities and powers’ that use even the most well-meaning efforts at mission for their own purposes”.¹⁰

FLIPPING THE CHRISTOLOGICAL AXIS

Rieger highlights three different theological presuppositions undergirding the different approaches to mission outlined above. Mission as outreach assumes, deep down, “not only that God is on our side, the side of the established churches, but also that God is introduced to other places through us”. Mission as relationship is clearer that “God is everywhere, not just on our side”, but without taking into account the asymmetries of power in the world that we live in, we are left assuming that “God is with those who mean well”. Mission as inreach emphasises that “God is never limited by the powers that

be”, and takes more seriously the possibility “that God may be in places where our common sense logic least expects it – one of the constant surprises of encounters with God reported in the Bible”.¹¹ In christological terms, I want to propose that we Christians who find ourselves on the privileged side of imbalanced power-relationships seek to ‘flip’ the axis from that described earlier (see Fig. 2, below).

Instead of asking ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ we might instead dis-identify with Jesus, asking ourselves rather ‘What Would Zacchaeus Do?’ As critical white theologian Jennifer Harvey reminds us,

“[w]hat we know about Zacchaeus is that when he encountered Jesus he did so as someone who had been utterly complicit with the powers that be... he had forsaken brotherhood and sisterhood, and been seduced into allegiance with death-dealing power structures. He had been massively and unjustly enriched by way of this allegiance... When Jesus challenged him, however, Zacchaeus did not remain overdetermined by his oppressor location. In response, Zacchaeus chose radical conversion.”

Asking “WWZD?” Harvey argues, enables us to avoid the dangers of evading the power-imbalances in our relationships, while also avoiding placing ourselves as “the central actor in the story”. “Perhaps most importantly, WWZD? models what humility and repentance look like ... and provide an example of what is required to turn away from complicity”.¹²

Alternatively, instead of expecting to encounter a ‘hungry’ Jesus on the receiving end of our generosity (cf Matt 25), what if we were to find common ground with a Jesus who, in Mark’s gospel especially, repeatedly finds himself challenged and changed in his encounters with others. Writing as a male theologian, it is especially poignant for me that the most significant of these transforming encounters are all with women: with the woman with a haemorrhage who interrupts Jesus’ journey (Mark 5:21-34), with the woman with the ointment who interrupts a private meal and anoints Jesus as messiah (Mark 14:3-9), and perhaps most strikingly with the Syro-Phoenician woman who challenges the apparent limits of Jesus’ imagination and wins healing for her daughter (Mark 7:24-31). In this last encounter,

⁹Ibid, 215-9

¹⁰Ibid, 219-22

¹¹Rieger, “Theology and Mission”, 223

¹²Jennifer Harvey, “What Would Zacchaeus Do? The case for disidentifying with Jesus”, 98-9.

in the narrative hinge of Mark's gospel, we witness Jesus apparently experiencing a change of mind, a change in his direction of travel (he literally, geographically, turns around after this moment) and a change in the whole horizon of his ministry (his sense of mission extended from the people of Israel alone to also include Gentiles). 'What Would Jesus Do?' looks quite different, I would suggest, when we identify with a Jesus on the receiving end.¹³ To return to the temptation story explored earlier, we might remember that after Jesus has resisted the three temptations to power, "angels came and ministered to him" (Matt 4:11). Who, we might ask, are the strange "angels" in our neighbourhoods, who come to us bringing gifts, invitations, and challenges?

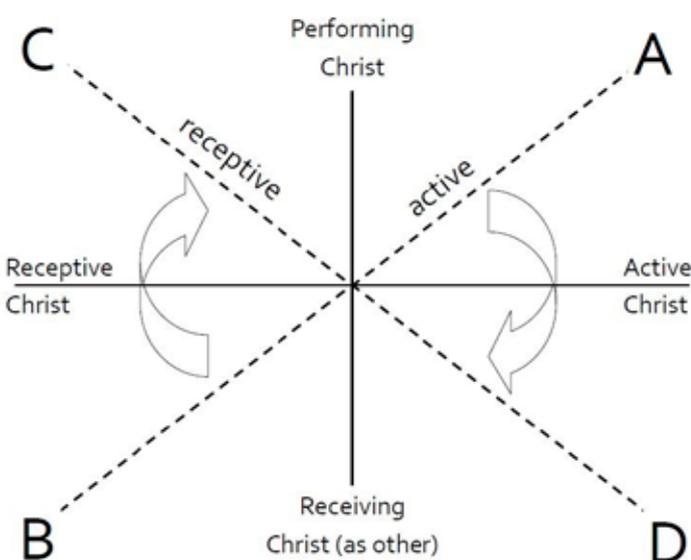


Fig 2 'Flipping' the christological axis

'Active' axis:

- A = 'What would Jesus do?' / 'Christ has no body but ours...' (Teresa of Avila)
- B = 'I was hungry and you fed me, a stranger and you welcomed me' (Matt 25)

'Receptive' axis:

- C = Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman (identifying with a 'challenged' Jesus)
- D = 'What would Zacchaeus do?' (dis-identifying with Jesus)

WHERE'S THE PASSION? RETURNING TO "THE WASTELAND"

If there is one question that guides our work in Hodge Hill more than any other, it is this: "Where's the passion?" Passion can mean suffering, of course: Where is the pain? Where does it hurt? But it also means: What fires you up? What are the things that make you get up in the morning? What are your deepest loves? What brings you to life?

In Hodge Hill, we have been on a "treasure hunt" over the course of at least seven years now, seeking out our local "unsung heroes": those ordinary people who make a big difference in our neighbourhoods, in quiet, often hidden ways. They are usually people who lead from the middle, not from the front – people who are well-connected to their neighbours, and well-trusted by them, not necessarily the "usual suspects" that outside organisations like the council seek out as "the voice of the community". They are people with passions, gifts and skills that they are willing to share more widely with their neighbours. We find them often because other people tell us about them. Sometimes we find them because we are out every week, knocking on doors, asking people what they are passionate about and what they would want to do in their community if they could find a couple of people to join them.¹⁴

Phil was one of our early "unsung heroes". He works in one of the few remaining local factories, but his real passion is theatre: putting on a performance, making people laugh. The Bromford Theatre Group was Phil's baby. He started it from scratch. From Christmas pantos to Halloween ghost walks, from Mad Hatter's Tea Parties to the Community Passion Play, the theatre group gets people involved, draws out their passions and gifts, gets them doing stuff they would never dream of. It nurtures confidence, it builds community, and it energises people for all kinds of action. It was Phil who sat in my living room and dictated to me the words of a five-act passion play, and it was the Bromford Theatre Group which performed it on that wintry April afternoon. Phil presented the passion play to our largely middle-class church as an invitation to get involved, an interruption to the church's regular patterns, a challenge to our tendencies to want

¹³ See e.g. Al Barrett, "'You Have Anointed Us': De-centring Good Friday from the Edges of Holy Week", in Stephen Burns, Nicola Slee & Michael N. Jaggesar (eds.), *The Edge of God: New Liturgical Texts and Contexts in Conversation* (London: Epworth, 2008), 153-70; Al Barrett, "In Persona Christae: Towards a feminist political Christ-(-)logy of presiding; or, how presiding with children trains us to challenge 'the powers that be'", in Nicola Slee & Stephen Burns (eds.), *Presiding Like a Woman* (London: SPCK, 2010), 166-77.

¹⁴ Much of this instinctively follows the principles of asset-based community development: see e.g. Al Barrett, *Asset-Based Community Development: A Theological Reflection* (London: Church Urban Fund, 2013).

to lead or host or own, and a gift that continues to enrich and deepen our sense of what it means to be both Christians and neighbours, passionately present and engaged in the life and longings, struggles and joys of our neighbourhood. What on the surface can look like a “wasteland” has turned out to be teeming with life.

“GIVE UP ACTIVISM”

Geographer Paul Chatterton has written an article entitled “Give up activism”...’. He reflects on how environmental activists blockading an oil refinery unintentionally cast the petrol tanker drivers as their “others”, on the “opposing side”. Instead, he argues for giving up the moral high ground of “activism”, to “learn to walk with [our] others on uncommon ground”.¹⁵ We are learning something similar in Hodge Hill: that the only meaningful way we are going to address the urgent challenges of poverty (of resources, relationships and identity) is by letting go of our need to always “take the initiative” and instead to seek to “hear to speech”¹⁶ the gifts and challenges of our neighbours – and to open ourselves up to be changed by them. This kind of change can only ever happen slowly, at “the speed of trust”¹⁷, but it is a kind of slowness that has never been more urgent. Rieger’s “mission as inreach” offers us one lens through which to understand the paradigm-shift required of us. I have suggested a similar shift needed in our christological thought and language. How can we hear Maya Angelou’s defiant “I’ll rise” in the often-unheard voices of our neighbours? Only by an increasing awareness of the power-imbalances in which we

ourselves are entangled and complicit, and by becoming aware of our own need for liberation, in intimate connection with our neighbours.

“If you have come here to help us, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with ours, then let us work together.”¹⁸

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¹⁵ Paul Chatterton, “Give up Activism” and Change the World in Unknown Ways: Or, Learning to Walk with Others on Uncommon Ground’, *Antipode* 38:2 (2006), 259–81.

¹⁶ Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p.205

¹⁷ A phrase often used by my friend and community-builder colleague Cormac Russell.

¹⁸ Quote attributed to Lilla Watson, an indigenous Australian (Murri) artist, activist and academic.

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