

THE CROSS-CULTURAL JESUS

John 4:1-28

Thank you Dr Michael Shen for this humbling privilege to preach the Word of God at this Chapel Service.

The lecturer who taught me the most subjects was Dr Rick Griffith. I caught from his life what it means to be a faithful and conscientious servant of the Lord. One of the subject he taught me was homiletics. So if I preach well today, it is because of him. If I preach lousily today, it is because I was a lousy student.

I graduate in 1997 and went to Thailand. Our three boys were 6, 4 and 2 years old. Today, they are 25, 23 and 21. They have overtaken me in height. But I am still ahead in weight.

I was asked to speak on “The Cross Cultural Jesus”. I shall speak from John 4. Jesus crossed at least 4 barriers in this encounter – Religious barriers, Racial barriers, Gender barriers and Historical barriers. There was a progression in the narrowing of the gap between Jesus and the Samaritan woman as the conversation unfolded.

From hostility in v9 *“How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.*

To respect in v 11 addressing Jesus as “Sir”

To amazement in v 19 , *“Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet; after Jesus told her about her marital mess.*

To faith in v29 , ²⁹*“Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”*

How we wish our evangelism can be as effective as Jesus’ every time – turning a hostile person to faith in one conversation. This is even more incredible because the barriers were at least 400 years of accumulated historical baggage between the Jews and the Samaritan.

Imagine a Japanese missionary ministering in China after the second world war. Imagine an American missionary ministering in Russia at the height of the cold war. Hostility can be a gulf as deep and wide as the

Grand Canyon. The opposing parties are standing so far apart that they see each other as small and insignificant.

Samaria was the capital of Northern Kingdom founded by King Omri in 880BC. He was the 6th king of Israel. The northern kingdom was exiled by the Assyrians in 722BC. The Assyrian king repopulated Samaria with some foreigners. When Zerubabel and Jeshua returned to rebuild the temple in 538BC, the Samaritans tried to join in the rebuilding but Zerubabel refused. Because they were not considered as Jews and their motive was suspicious. The Samaritan then slandered and discouraged to obstruct the Jews from rebuilding. The project was disrupted for 17 years before Haggai & Zechariah called them to complete the building.

The Samaritan was not to be outdone. They built their own temple in Mt Gerizim in 190BC. But it was utterly destroyed 62 years later by John Hyrcanus of the Jewish Hasmonean empire. That was the decisive blow to any hope of reconciliation. The Jews has destroyed the Samaritan’s sacred place. So when the Romans ended the Hasmonean empire, the Samaritan rejoiced because they were set free from Jewish rule

Can you see the depth of animosity between the two people? By the time of Jesus, Jews traveling between Galilee and Jerusalem would not want to pass through Samaria. They would rather make a big detour to the east, along Jordan river and come up again to Jerusalem via Jericho; even if it means adding 40 km to their journey.

⁴*But He needed to go through Samaria.*

“Dei” can be translated as “it is necessary, there is need of, it behooves, is right and proper”

** necessity in reference to what is required to attain some end*

Jesus actually had three routes to choose from to get from Jerusalem to Galilee; by the coastal road in the west, by Jordan river in the east; or the shortest path through Samaria. Jesus did not go through Samaria because it is the shortest way. The cross cultural Jesus deliberately use

this way, because it was necessary so that he could minister to this Samaritan woman. He was...

I Crossing over to reach out

Jesus would not have reached this Samaritan woman if he did what most Jews did; that is to detour in order to avoid meeting a Samaritan.

The Great Commission is about making disciples of all nations. And Jesus will not come again until **14** *this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.*

How can the Great Commission be fulfilled and how will the second coming take place if no one is willing to cross over? For the gospel to reach another nation, another people's group; someone must be willing to cross over. Someone must be willing to leave the familiar. Someone must be willing to learn a new language, be immersed a new culture. Someone must be willing to do what others are not prepared to do. Is that you? Why not you?

II Lowering self to open hearts

⁷*A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink."*

For any Jews, going into Samaria was hard enough; talking to a Samaritan woman was unthinkable; Asking for a drink from a Samaritan woman! Jesus! Where is your dignity?

Jesus lowered himself in order to start a conversation. He could have provided water for himself. But he did a humbling thing to open up a conversation.

One tendency of fresh missionary is to keep quoting our own home country. "In Singapore, we do this, In Singapore we do that..." When I was learning Thai, I have classmates from many countries. The Korean missionaries would say quite often: "nai prathet Korea..."

I caution our missionaries, please avoid saying "In Singapore, In Singapore.." It projects superiority. It creates distance. It closes hearts. Humility is the important opening posture of any cross-cultural missionaries, not superiority.

Cross-cultural experience actually is good for our soul. It makes you feel like an idiot. You may have a M Div, a Th M, or PhD; but you only have primary 1 language. How much thought can you convey with P1 language? The frustration is intensify when you progress to the level you could understand a conversation, but you do not have the vocabulary or the fluency to display what you have within. That is actually a very important spiritual lesson of humility; of security. I am who I am not because I can give anything. I am who I am even if others see me as an idiot.

Jesus did not mind asking for a drink from a Samaritan woman in order to open a conversation.

III Addressing needs to stay relevant

¹³*Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."*

¹⁵*The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."*

Jesus offered a drink that she will never thirst again. Jesus meant the everlasting life. But she was not thinking of everlasting life. Her desire was she would not need to keep coming back to draw water again. That was her immediate desire, her felt need.

The history of Protestant missions has often began with meeting a presenting need in society. Schools, hospitals, orphanages are some common examples. But in the last 50-60 years, many countries around our region have progressed and developed. The entry level of such approach is different today. The Baptist mission in Thailand had

hospitals for the poor, but they have closed it because of the general healthcare provided by the government has matured.

Education mission is still relevant but it takes a different form. Generally the government and the Catholics have provided high quality schools for the population. Instead starting Thai mission schools, we started student centres like these near universities; to meet the aspiration of the new generation to go international. Students sign up for conversation classes. Through conversation, our missionaries and volunteers get to know the students and their lives in the community. These are some volunteers from Singapore who offer one year of their life to God to serve in the mission field.

We have about 120 students every year, out of which 20-30 would drop in frequently outside class time. From these, we choose 10-15 every year to invite them to an immersion camp in Singapore. They are hosted by various families of the church. They attend church for the first time and experience the life of a Christian community. A number of them became Christians upon returning to Thailand. This youngman was in the first batch of students three years ago. He became a Christian. He led the third batch of students to Singapore last year. He is now our volunteer at the center while pursuing his Masters. He has the intention of coming into fulltime ministry some day because of the life he shared with our missionaries.

Meeting relevant needs is only the door to the eternal gospel. The students came to us like the Samaritan woman, desiring something that would make her life better. Jesus' purpose has always been the gospel of the kingdom. We should never lose sight of that and become a mere social gospel.

IV Creating Curiosity to invite quest

¹⁶Jesus said to her, *“Go, call your husband, and come here.”*

¹⁷The woman answered and said, *“I have no husband.”*

Jesus said to her, *“You have well said, ‘I have no husband,’ ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly.”*

¹⁹The woman said to Him, *“Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet*

From the subject of water, Jesus took a very sharp turn and ventured into a personal subject. , *“Go, call your husband, and come here.”* V16 can be intrusive and offensive without the build up in verses 7-13. Notice Jesus did not start by saying *“your marital life is messed up. You had 5 husbands. Now you are trying the 6th”*. This may true and prophetic. But that is prophesy without wisdom.

You know, you can say true things but push people away. Wisdom is to know the way of the heart. To present the truth in a way that creates curiosity leading to a quest.

Curiosity is created by being unusual. Jesus' prophetic words to her were unusual. The unusual does not need to be supernatural all the time. The most common curiosity our missionaries and volunteers created among the students is their willingness to sacrifice their jobs, their comfort and go into the mission field. The curious question is “how could what you are doing now be more valuable than the good salary you sacrificed”. Through their testimonies, the students learn “man shall not live by bread alone”. There is more to life than food and drink. It sparks a quest to discover what could that be.

V Going higher to neutralise differences

²⁰Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.”

²¹Jesus said to her, *“Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. ²²You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. ²⁴God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”*

V20 was the Samaritan's turn to take a sharp corner to the subject of worship. *“Granted you are a prophet, but we are fundamentally different since the days of our forefathers.”* Jesus led her higher to understand worship is not a matter of which place or which tradition, but worship in spirit and in truth because God is Spirit. If worship is in spirit and

untruth, every place can be a place of worship. Every tradition can be enriched.

Christianity has been seen as a white man's religion in our region for a long time. As late as 20 years ago, Thai society despise those who turn to Christ. They are seen as turning away from their ancestry. It was considered unfilial. Things may be changing but it is still an issue. Today more and more missionaries are not white. It confuses their paradigm. It also defuses their resistance.

Young man in Thailand are expected to enter monkhood for a period as a sign of their love for their mother. Because the monks teaches that the merits gained by a man's monkhood is transferred to his mother. Many young men are reluctant to become Christians because they want to perform the duty of a filial son.

Going higher in this instance means to affirm the virtue of being filial to our parents. But the expression of that love may differ.

In summary, the five progression of cross-cultural mission:

- I Crossing over to reach out**
- II Lowering self to open hearts**
- III Addressing needs to stay relevant**
- IV Creating Curiosity to invite quest**
- V Going higher to neutralise differences**

The cross cultural Jesus did not leap frog to seal the gospel. It was a journey of putting one foot in front of another. Our technological world quest for the most efficient and the most effective methodology. The more instantaneous response to the gospel seems most valid. Life is not always like that. Some fruits take longer to ripe than others. Some flowers take longer to bloom than others.

Cross cultural missionaries need patience as well as passion. Passion without patience is in danger of pragmatism. Patience without passion is in danger of passivism. How do you know the time and place for passion or patience? How do you live in the tension between passion or

patience? We serve the way Jesus served. ³⁴*Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.*

That is the subject of another sermon.