

# Following Jesus

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Text: Mark 8:34-38

## Introduction

As a sign and presence of the unity of the body of Christ in Asia, CCA has come a long way since its inception half a century ago. Living out Christian unity has become a huge and varied undertaking that entails organizational planning and financing in the likes of business corporations. It's time to get our bearings in the journey. How are we faring together? Are we on the same track? Are we persuaded that we are following the right way: the way of Jesus?

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Whatever biblical scholars might say about the authenticity of the text, it genuinely reflects the original and primitive challenge that Jesus gave to the disciples. Jesus was telling them his way to God's righteousness. His way was different from the one offered by the Pharisees, which was righteousness by the law. The ordinary believers found the Pharisaic way impossible to follow. The kingdom of God came to be an exclusive club of those who had proper education, economic means and social status. What started as a liberating gift—i.e. the law—that gave order and meaning to an emerging national community had turned into an impenetrable barrier that kept people away from God.

Jesus saw a people who were desperately seeking the kingdom of God but found themselves shut out by the religious leaders of the time. Jesus told them that he knew another way to God's righteousness: "Come, follow me.... My yoke is easy and my burden is light." But he warned them that the way to God's righteousness was the way of the cross. They had to deny themselves, that is, to give up the things that defined a righteous person in order to be truly and entirely free to follow Jesus. To take up the cross means to enter a life that society and the authorities would consider outside the mainstream, alien and dangerous. The cross represents the fate of anyone who follows a way different and contrary to what is defined by the authorities.

In the early years of the church, when Christianity was then simply known as The Way, following Jesus meant rejecting emperor-worship because Jesus alone was Lord. Loyalty to the emperor was not on the same plane as loyalty to Jesus. When made to choose between the two loyalties, the early Christians declared that they would "obey God rather than men."

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A new era came when Christianity became the new darling of the empire under Emperor Constantine. The gospel reached the far corners of the world and the church became truly catholic, thanks to imperial sponsorship. But the unprecedented freedom to propagate the gospel later turned into intolerance of other faiths and a license to persecute non-Christians. A point had been reached when the church gained the world but lost her soul.

In another time in church history, pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that when Jesus calls, "he bids us to die." It meant to live dangerously in a perilous time. This was the very opposite of living securely and comfortably in the household of Western civilization. Having found a niche in modern society, the church in Europe saw the kingdom of God emerging from the progress of Western civilization. The historical consequence of a cultural theology was the failure of discernment by the German Protestant church of the evil of Nazism. Liberal theology did save Christian theology from irrelevance, but in the end it paved the way to a fatal compromise of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are historic moments in the life of the church when she is challenged to make a clean break from her past in order to renew her answer to Jesus' call to discipleship. This is the great challenge of self-denial. In renouncing the fruits and gains of history, the church suffers death but gains a rebirth. In addition to self-denial, Christian discipleship requires carrying our own crosses, which is a symbol of imperial rejection or by the powers-that-be. The church does not choose its social and political environment but is rather thrown into it. At all times, she must be able to discern the line that demarcates faithfulness to the gospel and conformity to the political order. At some points merely calling the attention of civil authorities to correct instances of injustice may only serve to prolong an evil situation. Obedience to God may require a total rejection of an unjust social order, the consequence of which is the cross.

What does following Jesus mean to the church in Asia today? Today we exist in a global village. The church that exists in Asia makes her witness not only in the context of Asian realities but also in the context of global realities. Not only that, the church exists in a fast-changing world. In recent weeks, there are tell-tale indications that human history is reaching a nodal point that marks the end of an economic epoch. Neo-liberalism is nearing the end of the road. Its success in creating extraordinary amount of wealth proved to be more virtual than real. By scaling unprecedented heights in economic growth it has actually been digging its own grave. The solutions to its crisis being applied at the very centers of neo-liberal capitalism are proofs of its final failure. The medicine being contemplated to save it is actually its poison. But these measures are really meant to resurrect a dying system into a more ferocious blood-sucking beast very much like a *Nero Redivivus* in the Book of Revelation.

But even as the international economic order, invariably called by progressives as imperialist globalization, is imploding everywhere – from the United States to Russia, from Iceland to Japan – a new order to replace it is nowhere in sight. It looks like a fallen empire does not have to strike back; it only has to rebuild and rejuvenate itself. At this point, the more urgent and greater task ahead is to prepare the impoverished and broken victims of the present world order to seize the initiative in advancing their agenda for a new social order nationally and globally. The Beast is wounded and weakened: this is a momentous

opportunity for the oppressed and poor of the world to forge a new solidarity to midwife a more liberating, just and humane yet rational social and international order that has long been waiting to be born in a global scale.

Asia is a focal point in the global crisis for a number of reasons. First, Asia is home base of underdeveloped, emerging as well as leading economies of the world. The contradictions of old and new economic and political forces make the Asian zone highly volatile. No wonder it is also home of some of the world's longest-running armed insurgencies. Second, the clash of religious and cultural loyalties continues to be sharp and decisive in shaping contemporary Asian society. At one end, the old religions continue to hold sway over vast portions of the populations; on the other, waves of new religious impetus threaten to break up traditional ties of communities. Third, Asian peoples are younger with high social expectations and with eagerness to be at the cutting edge of change. The positive forces of change are outnumbering the defenders of the status quo.

For the church, this is the moment that defines its witness in the world. Those who study and do theology have learned in their academic work about an analogy between world history and salvation history. Signs of God's decisive intervention to save the world are transparent in certain historical moments that indicate a dramatic end of the old era and the emergence of a new one. Or, human history both reveals and participates in the divine history of salvation. We are amazed and excited to realize that what we've been only talking about in the classroom is about to take place in the real arena of history. From the perspective of the Christian faith, the economy of God's salvation is about the irreversible dissolution of an old order held captive by the powers of evil and the dramatic appearance of a new era of peace and goodwill throughout the world. Today, the church is witnessing this biblical drama unfolding right before her eyes.

In the face of this challenge, the church cannot rest on its past achievements and stand by idly as the whole creation groans to be reborn. Neither are her old devices sufficient or even useful to meet the challenge. She is called to "deny" herself and to "take up (her) cross" and follow Jesus even if it should cause her her life. The church is not many and strong in Asia but her witness to God's redemptive intervention in the world today is a participation in God's mission.

Across the centuries, the church has expanded its ministries and opened new frontiers of service, especially to the poor, the marginalized and victims of social inequalities and injustice. The churches in Asia comprising CCA have inherited this great heritage of witness and service. Truly, the heritage has enriched the life and work of the church. But in another sense, the sheer accretion of the many forms of services is becoming a burden. The burden may have weighed down the church to the extent that she can only see the ground but not the way ahead, much less a vision over at the horizons of history. Because of her load, the church may be just plodding but not oriented to the way of Jesus who stands yonder, beckoning her. The church must always be on the watch for the *kairos*. In this historic moment, all of the church's passion and energy should be galvanized for the singular task of helping prepare the world for the rebirth of God's creation.

## Conclusion

Today, the church in Asia and everywhere in the world stands on the threshold of change of historic proportions. One way or the other, the changes will impact on our ministries and on the way these will be grounded theologically. The church has at least two options to take: she can continue to simply plod on until circumstances overtake and throw her down, and from there start picking up the pieces again; or she can reorder her priorities, re-channel her energy and resources, restructure her organization, choose a new kind of leadership and throw herself more fully into the task of changing and rebuilding the world.

Jesus, we recall, could have chosen to live longer so that more people could see, walk, be freed of demons, and hear the good news. There was a long line waiting for him. Yet, barely three years into his ministry, he chose to go to Jerusalem, faced his adversaries and finally carried his cross to Golgotha. It was the right moment. It was the hour set by God for him to offer his life as a sacrifice for the redemption of the world from sin. In the same way, Dietrich Bonhoeffer left behind his traditional functions as a theologian and pastor and got involved in a political conspiracy to end the dark days of Hitler's reign in Germany. Like Jesus, he knew that when the *kairos* comes, he must leave everything behind and take up his cross.

At the eve of his death, Jesus asked the disciples if they were willing and able to drink of his cup, the cup of his suffering. And they said, yes. Let's ponder on that question in this consultation and beyond.

## Biblical Lessons on Wider Ecumenism

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Text: Luke 10:26-37

The parable of the Good Samaritan has the potential to critique both theological educators and church workers on their journey to a wider ecumenism. This story can help us to see our vocational failures and at the same time encourage us to become effective contributors to wider ecumenism.

Who are the actors in this story? There are three actors, representing three groups of people in today's context.

First is the lawyer, scribe or teacher of the law. He is probably a student of scripture, highly regarded and respected, having a seat in the Sanhedrin, the highest tribunal of the Jews. The lawyer may represent theological educators, learned theologians, those with doctorates in theology, with in-depth knowledge of scripture – and yet, whose questions do not cohere with contextual realities.

Second are the priest and the levite – religious leaders, high class, elite – who were connected with temple service and also had a good political links with the Roman Empire. This group may represent the church workers – including secretaries, pastors and bishops.

Third is the Samaritan – an ethnic group that was considered as 'half-breed' or 'impure' race (2 Kings 17:24ff). This group represents the outcast, even an enemy of the Jews.

These three groups of people are confronted with one word: **Neighbor**.

In Jesus' time, racial and class distinction was very apparent. The Jews thought they were the chosen people of God. The lawyer, priest, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees were high class religious leaders. The Jews were under Roman Empire.

Jesus refused to give a straightforward answer to the lawyer's query. The lawyer asked: Who is my neighbor? It was a question of insider/outsider boundary. Jesus only narrates a story. The story takes place on a dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho, about 27 km. distance. The place is, believed to be the hideout of robbers. A man, most likely a Jew, was then attacked by robbers and he was robbed of everything. Then came three important persons who also took that dangerous road. Of these three, the Samaritan came out being the hero, the one who did the right thing. Through this story, Jesus put a national enemy of the Jews in a heroic role, not the religious people – i.e. priest and levite. What can we learn from this story?

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First is that openness to the world of the 'other' is the starting point of wider ecumenism. The world has been divided by race, caste, colour, class, sex, etc. Removing prejudices and hatred, and developing positive attitude to accommodate and welcome others should be the first step to wider ecumenism. The existing ecumenism and ecclesiology do not bring justice to many sections of the people – e.g. the marginalized people, women and children. Many are not included in the agenda of ecumenism. The lawyer asked the question of who is insider and outsider. Jesus' answer was from the perspective of the "other". Today the question of ecumenism is also about breaking down boundaries. There is no boundary in God's oikoumene. We need to come out of the human-made boundaries – e.g. so-called church rules and regulations, if we want to achieve wider ecumenism. We need to cross the boundaries, like what the good Samaritan did.

Second is de-centering perspective. Traditionally church mission, ministry and ecumenism have been based on a top-down institutionalized set-up, keeping the boundary between insider and outsider. In the biblical story, the priest and the levite represented this model. Pastors and church workers function today as caretakers of church programmes and preservers of church traditions. This function has become the priority of our mission and ministry today. It is important but it is not the only ministry. Many Christian ministers have indifferent attitudes to the needy and the wounded. The priest and levite were very important people in the religious life of the Jews. They were highly respected as holy people. But when they saw the wounded man, they turned their faces and went the other way. Many good church leaders think that emerging social issues are things that should be done by the NGOs and social workers, but not the business of the church.

From the very beginning, the existing ecumenism has been confined to mainline churches and limited to interchurch unity or church union or fellowship. Then interfaith dialogue with other faiths in the journey came to be added. But emerging issues like HIV/AIDS, disability, conflicts, marginalized people like indigenous people, Dalit, adivasis, tribal, women, etc. are not on the ecumenical agenda. People from Pentecostal and Evangelical backgrounds are still excluded.

We have a very traditional understanding of ecclesiology – i.e. a fenced church – and we expect that people should come in if they want to participate in the journey. This is not the ecumenism that Jesus talked about. Jesus turned upside down the Jewish attitude and put a national outcast or enemy as hero in this story. Jesus made a Samaritan the hero of the story, not the temple priest and levite.

The Samaritan is the model of wider ecumenism. He saw the wounded man. The wounded man must be a Jew. But for the Samaritan, race was not a barrier to the immediate need to save the life of a person. We can't understand the need simply by studying statistics or reading reports.. Seeing is important, which means involvement and action.

The Samaritan was *moved with pity*. Compassion brings effective action. Love and compassion should be the essence of our ministry, not the church traditions.

The Samaritan *went to the wounded victim*, meaning action and participation. Seeing, compassion, touching and participation – these are the ingredients for wider ecumenism.

Ecumenism must go beyond the boundary of church union, remove the institutional barriers, and cross various boundaries, whether geographical, political, religious or cultural. Wider ecumenism is a common witness and common service. This must undergird our movement and journey.

We need a paradigm shift in ecumenism. We need a new ecumenical paradigm where God is perceived as fellow sufferer, a comforter and hope. We need to an ecumenism from the perspective of the poor and the victims, and of the whole creations. We also need an ecclesiology where all sections of the people are included, together in the God's table - sharing and learning together irrespective of sex, color, race or other backgrounds.

Finally Jesus said to the lawyer: Who is the neighbor? The lawyer replied: the one who helped the wounded man. Then Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."