

Memories of India

Many of you will have received the IREF News Letter I wrote last month on my return from another memorable visit to India. It had to do in place of the normal February edition of the DRBC News!

Three weeks on from my return, I still find myself reminiscing about all the good experiences we enjoyed out there and the rich lessons learned. After my first visit to India back in 1996, it took me about two months to adjust to life in the UK again such was the trauma of 'cultural re-entry', or 'reverse culture shock' as it is sometimes called.

This time the adjustment period has been quicker, but I find myself not wanting to lose sight of the rich lessons I have been re-taught. In particular, whenever I am amongst the Christian community in India, I feel I am experiencing a much more authentic form of Christianity than we know here in Britain.

Values to live by

What strikes me most is the value system lived out by our brother and sister believers in India.

- Our society advocates *self-assertion*, so much so that colleges even run courses in the subject, to teach people to be *more* self-assertive. But the Indian Christians practise **humble service** for the benefit of others. Nothing is ever too much trouble for them to do for one another.
- Our society is so often characterised by *grumbling*, despite the relative abundance of our material possessions. By contrast, the Indian Christians exude a serene **contentment**, despite having so little materially speaking.
- Our society is *acquisitive*; people spend their energies on trying to get more and more for themselves. The Indian believers are characterised by **generosity**; they take great delight in sharing what little they have with others.
- We are concerned to promote a *good image* of ourselves to others. The Indian believers are much more deferential and seek to **respect** one another in the Lord.
- We *fret and worry* when things don't turn out according to our plans, or when we can't see the way ahead. The Indian believers instinctively turn to **prayer**. There is an immediacy and nearness to their relationship with God. They are people of great faith – for their faith is in a great God.

In view of the distorted value system our society has adopted (one that, as Christians, we unwittingly imbibe), it is not very surprising that our lives are often *joyless*. By contrast, the Indian believers are characterised by **the joy given by the Holy Spirit**, as Paul puts it in 1 Thess 1.6. And this *in spite of the severe suffering* many of them experience because of their faith.

Getting our values right

So what's the secret of getting our value system right? Significantly, Paul begins the verse in which he speaks of the Thessalonians Holy Spirit joy like this. **You became imitators of us and of the Lord**. We must learn our values, not from the society we happen to have been born into; nor from the one we have grown up in, or find ourselves living in now. We must learn our values from the example of Jesus himself.

- He reminded us that *the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many* (Mark 10.45).
- He taught us that it is *more blessed to give than to receive* (Acts 20.35).
- He told us that it is *the meek who will inherit the earth* (Mat 5.5).
- He told us *not to worry about what we shall eat or wear* (Mat 6.25).
- He told us to *make God's kingly rule over us our priority in life* (Mat 6.33).
- He told us to *pray about our needs* (Mat 7.7) – and to do so persistently.
- He encouraged us to *ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete* (John 16.24).

There was a clear purpose in Jesus teaching us all these values to live by. **I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete** (John 15.11).

Whenever I return to Britain from India, I realise that we have got so many of our values topsy-turvy, and the Indian Christians have got theirs the right way up! I am not suggesting that they have got everything sorted out to the point where their church life is perfect - far from it. Like the *model* Christians in Thessalonica (1 Thess 1.7), they still have a long way to go. But I pray that God might grant us the humility to learn these important lessons from those more advanced in the faith than many of us are. It's not

how much we know that counts, but how well we live out what we know – in imitation of Jesus (Eph 5.1).

'The Passion' stirs strong passions

Last Monday afternoon, the countryside looked beautiful. A cloudless blue sky contrasted with the snow-white fields. Unfortunately, I found myself sitting in the dark for two hours! I had been invited to a special screening of Mel Gibson's new film release, *The Passion*, for church leaders in the Northeast. The film has received a lot of attention in the press and goes on general release in the UK on 26th March, just in time for Easter – a clever marketing ploy. The film depicts the sufferings of Christ from the Garden of Gethsemane to his death on the cross. So what are we to make of it as Christians? Let me sum up my own thoughts under four headings.

➤ **Unhelpful Violence.**

I was going to write 'unnecessary violence', but I feel 'unhelpful' is a more apt adjective to use. The film has an '18' rating. It's definitely not for the squeamish. One man was carried out of the Newcastle screening having passed out. The brutality of our Lord's ill-treatment at the hands of the Jewish authorities, his scourging at the hands of the Roman soldiers, and his eventual crucifixion are all portrayed in graphic detail. No opportunity is lost to show blood and gore in ways that, at times are frankly gratuitous (like the raven that pecks at one of the victims crucified alongside Jesus). We know that Roman scourging and crucifixion were terribly brutal. The first century Roman orator, Cicero, regarded crucifixion as so barbaric that he wrote, "*The very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears ... the mere mention of it is unworthy of a Roman citizen*". Perhaps this is one reason why the Gospel writers record the brutality of our Lord's sufferings with such restraint. They refrain from giving any lurid details out of their deep respect for him. It was enough for them simply to report that he had been scourged and crucified, without them elaborating on the gory details. The most graphic descriptions of our Lord's physical sufferings come in Old Testament prophecies, rather than in the Gospels (e.g. Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, Lamentations 3). There must be a good reason for this, which we should respect when speaking about our Lord's sufferings. Sadly, the film left me feeling more disturbed about Mel Gibson's morbid fascination with gore and brutality (remember his violent role in *Braveheart*) than giving me any fresh insights into our Lord's *deepest* sufferings, which were spiritual rather than just physical.

➤ **Artistic Liberties**

In the retelling of any story, there is bound to be a certain amount of artistic interpretation. That's true of the widely used *Jesus* video, which (for the most part) sticks to the dialogue of Luke's Gospel. Even preachers use their imagination, backed (hopefully) by good historical research, to try and reconstruct what a biblical event was really like. But there were times in the film when Mel Gibson's artistic licence spilled over into pure fantasy, such as the scene in

which Mary is seen to be mopping up the blood shed during Jesus' scourging with towels supplied by Pilate's wife! The prominence given to Mary throughout the film betrays Mel Gibson's Catholic background.

➤ **Hopelessly Unbalanced**

The two hours of unremitting brutality in the film are followed by barely two minutes depicting the resurrection of our Lord. The four Gospels present us with a very different ratio. Taking the verses from the Garden of Gethsemane to the death and burial of our Lord, and comparing them to the coverage given to his resurrection, the following figures emerge. In Matthew's gospel, the ratio is 104:20; in Mark, 88:8 (or 20 if the longer version is accepted); in Luke 89:53; and in John, 82:56. Overall, the ratio is 363:137, or about 2½:1. By giving the resurrection such scant coverage in the film, one is left with a feeling of overwhelming suffering rather than one of ultimate triumph. The film is literally almost "hope-less", and so a travesty of the genuine gospel – the good news of Christ's victory over sin and suffering, death and Satan. It is significant that in the apostles' preaching, as recorded for us in the early chapters of Acts, much is made of the resurrection of Christ. Traditionally in Roman Catholic art, Jesus is depicted either as a dependent baby in the arms of his mother, Mary; or as a helpless victim of brutal suffering, still nailed to a cross. The truth is that Christ's earthly sufferings are now firmly behind him. He is risen from death, and is now seated at God's right hand in glory. "*I am the Living One; I was dead, but look - I am alive for evermore!*" (Rev 1.18). I realise the film is called *The Passion* and so centres on Christ's sufferings. But is it right to do so without balancing them with a full presentation of Christ's triumphant resurrection, as all the Gospel writers do? Without this, the film portrays an inadequate view of Christ, which is hardly 'gospel'.

➤ **Ultimately Pointless**

The greatest criticism I would have of the film is that it cries out for some sort of an explanation as to what all of Christ's sufferings were *for*. Did they have any purpose? Are they simply a graphic example of how brutal human beings can be to one another when faced with a rival? How did Christ's sufferings differ from those inflicted on the victims of the holocaust, for instance, or those from the barbarous civil wars that have torn so many parts of Africa apart? Without due weight being given to Christ's resurrection, all his sufferings seem somewhat pointless. So what was the point of the film, I was left wondering.

The **best line** in the film came from the lips of Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry Jesus' cross for him. (Incidentally, all the dialogue is either in Latin or Aramaic, with subtitles provided in English). Simon is heard to say, **Remember, I'm the innocent one carrying the cross of the condemned.** I don't know if the irony was intended, but those words point us to the *real* significance of Christ's sufferings. He was the innocent one, bearing the death sentence our sins deserved (1 Peter 2.24; 3.18) so that we might be *released from our sins, reconciled to our Creator, and received into God's family for all of eternity.* And to that we would want to say, "*Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*"