

“Beautiful Feet” – A message Given by Ruth Harland in St Hilda’s, Upper Hutt on Sunday 13th August 2017

In the year 2000 an American sociology student, Robert Woodberry, chose a very courageous PhD research topic. The question Woodberry set himself to explore was what influence did the presence of Christian missionaries, from the 1800s, have on the governance and well being of that country in the year 2000?

This was a courageous topic because it has been decided by most scholars of our time that on balance missionaries had a negative influence. Missionaries were culturally insensitive proselytisers who achieved little more than extend colonialism through the 19th and into the 20th centuries.

This view has become so widely accepted that I am sure you will be familiar with the fact that if you give money to foreign missions you can sometimes gain tax credits if your gift goes towards such as the relief of suffering but money that is given for Christian missionaries themselves or for the teaching of the Christian message gains no tax benefits. It is believed such work brings no benefits.

Paul tells us that those who bring the good news of the gospel have beautiful feet.

Perhaps Paul was out of touch. Or maybe Paul is telling us that the good news brings inner peace but makes no public difference, certainly no significant public difference.

Let’s look at our reading from Romans, what was Paul on about? and then come back to Woodberry’s research.

At first reading it sounds as if Paul is telling a story that we Protestants have become familiar with.

Our salvation is a gift of grace and requires no works.

This view is a simplification of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Some have taken this message a step further to say that the Old Testament was just about law and works and the NT just about grace and faith.

Many biblical scholars now call us to look more deeply at what Paul is actually saying in Romans. Behind Paul’s arguments are his own story: he, like many Jews, had initially rejected Jesus the Messiah. Here in Romans Paul explains how this could be. The problem is that many Jews have missed the heart of the OT and so have missed seeing that Jesus was the end, the goal, the fulfilment of the OT. They should have expected Jesus. The situation is summarised in two competing views: The Righteousness (or the salvation or the right standing before God) that has come by careful obedience to the law, and the Righteousness (or the salvation or the right standing before God) that has come through faith.

The basic issue here is that these two forms of righteousness are achieved in two different ways.
Romans 9:32 The Righteousness through Law is pursued through individual effort.

Then Romans 10:3 The Righteousness through faith is a gift, in fact God is giving away His own righteousness, the righteousness that Christ makes available to everyone.

The Law Righteousness is just for the Jews or those who become Jews, the proselytes.

What has happened to the law?

Well to the Righteousness by Law group it is critical, their means to salvation.

The place of the law to the Righteousness by Faith group is not pursued here, but is easily found elsewhere in Paul's writing...the ceremonial aspect of the law is no longer required, but for the Righteousness by faith group the law has a vital ongoing role in the Christian life.

But the main point of what Paul is saying is that he is trying to persuade his fellow Jews that in following the Righteousness through Law they have actually missed the heart of the law/the Torah, the OT.

In other words the fundamental point is not that the OT got it wrong, it is that the Righteousness by Law group got the OT wrong.

Righteousness through faith is actually what the OT is about.

Did you notice the key verse in our OT reading?

Deuteronomy 30:6 God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your children so that you will love the Lord with all your heart and soul....

Israelite boys were required to be circumcised - an outward, physical sign that they were part of God's people, but this act of obedience did not save them, it was God's inner work in their hearts that saved them, that gave them God's righteousness, the righteousness needed for a right relationship with God. So righteousness/salvation was not achieved by law but by faith...this does not mean that obeying the law did not matter, just that it did not save.

Paul reinforces this point by referring to Deuteronomy 30, in chapter 10. From v 5 he is quoting the law, the Torah, the writings of Moses.

First is a quote from Leviticus 18.

Paul is saying here: If you live as if salvation is earned through your own efforts than you cannot live by faith. These two means of salvation are mutually exclusive. Elsewhere he will expand this to say: Live as

if your own efforts can save you and you will be damned by this, because your own efforts can never be good enough.

Then Paul moves onto the Righteousness through faith, this time from Deuteronomy 30:11-14, the end of this morning's OT reading.

In Deuteronomy Moses essentially says: What is required for your salvation is not too hard, you do not have to go up to heaven OR across the sea...it is right here for you to embrace.

Paul takes almost the same words and deepens their meaning by adding Christ to the argument. What Paul is saying both directly and by implication in 10:6-8 goes like this:

What is required for your salvation? What is required for the righteousness by faith?

Do you need to go up to heaven? NO

You don't need to, Christ has already done that for you.

Do you need to go down to the place of the dead? NO

You don't need to, Christ has already done that for you.

...the word (God's promise of salvation) is right here beside you, for you to embrace.

Paul is desperately trying to convince those of his own people who reject Jesus.

He is saying: NO change, this is the OT continuing and made clearer through Jesus.

He is also saying: It matters if you get it wrong, your very salvation depends on it.

Then Paul expands on what Moses says about the heart and the lips. The heart is a metaphor for belief, and the lips a metaphor for action. The heart - the core of our being - needs to believe in the work of Christ for us, and the mouth, and this includes the life, needs to express this recognition of the lordship of Christ.

Through Christ the righteousness through faith that was once just for Jews is now made available to all comers. This gift is for everyone who believes!

So what about those missionaries who sought to spread this gospel?

The research involved was no small matter. A huge amount of data had to be collected.

Where were missionaries stationed? What happened in the countries where missionaries worked? And then all this information had to be compared with controls. Was the apparent missionary effect in one country real or accidental? Did a country with missionaries flourish because that country was on good trading routes, or the climate was better....all these factors had to be considered. As this line of research went against the current views in sociology Woodberry had to be far more rigorous in his analysis than other researchers. He compared missionary influence with over 50 other contributing factors and he developed sophisticated methods of statistical analysis.

The results?

Catholic missionaries up until the 1960s had little to no impact on helpful developments in a country. State sponsored Protestant missionaries also had no effect, but the influence of the independent Protestant missionaries, a group Woodberry described as CPs - Conversionary Protestant missionaries - was huge.

Areas where [Conversionary] Protestant - CP -missionaries had a significant presence in the past are more developed today, with comparatively better health, lower corruption, greater literacy, more robust membership in nongovernmental associations, and with more stable democracies.

This is very surprising. The CPs did not go to darkest Africa, through Asia, or to the far Antipodes to introduce democracy. Far from it. The gospel was their number one motivation. But an unexpected consequence of their work was to build a foundation for the development of free democratic states.

It went like this.

If you want democracy to flourish you need:

1) religious liberty

Many CPs came from a non-conformist background and their denominations had suffered persecution. They were very keen on promoting religious liberty.

2) mass education

One of the first tasks these missionaries set for themselves was to establish universal literacy so people could read the Bible. Everyone needed to know the good news regardless of their race, their position in society or their gender.

In a number of countries the language was not written down, CPs wrote it down.

Pre-missionary education was almost invariably only for a male elite. CPs started schools for everyone. And once people could read CPs published religious materials in large volumes.

3) mass printing

Once the CPs began publishing books and pamphlets then everyone else got on board as well. The Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists in the countries in which they worked, as well as governments also began publishing vast quantities of material.

Most of the first Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist printers learnt their skills in mission printeries, and they used the same typefaces the missionaries had developed.

This was not what the missionaries had planned to achieve!

4) independent newspapers

Once they were working among the people the missionaries learnt of many injustices and they often tried to publicise what was going on. The first independent newspapers in Asia were all the initiative of CPs.

....a democracy requires well informed citizens

you also need

5) voluntary organisations to better society

Christians like to found voluntary organisations to better society. In addition, their work in literacy paved the way for others to start voluntary organisations. Most of the founders of the first indigenous political parties went to Protestant mission schools.

6) the rule of law

and good and fair laws

The CPs were a thorn in the side of colonial powers and greedy settlers. We know this from our own story. The Treaty of Waitangi was developed after missionaries petitioned the British government to do something to curtail the land-grabbing NZ Company. The English Colonial office contained a number of sympathetic Evangelicals. NZ got a very fair treaty to protect the Maori.

Indirectly maybe but because they were there, and because of their beliefs about God and about people CPs initiated huge changes, and this despite the fact that none of them were perfect. A few were selfish and even racist. But altogether the presence and prevalence of CPs has been the most important factor so far identified by researchers in influencing the rise and spread of stable democracies around the world.

SO If you want a blossoming democracy today? The solution is simple—if you have a time machine - Send a 19th-century missionary.

I find these conclusions remarkable.

I was taught that the enlightenment brought democracy. Woodberry's research reveals that democratic regimes that were set up by enlightenment liberals, without a strong missionary presence, were either elitist and autocratic, or unstable and illiberal.

How God must laugh....His gospel, His salvation through faith is good news for individuals and it is good news for communities and countries.

These conclusions are also cautionary.

There is nothing magic about being a Christian missionary.

The state sponsored missionaries made no significant difference. Why not? They were overly influenced by the culturally fashionable ideas of the day rather than the righteousness of God.

The Catholic missionaries?

In brief this church was very hierarchical and aimed to bring change largely through working with elites, and it was committed to a foreign Latin mass. It was not until the middle of the 20th century that the Catholics came to grips with the need to give everyone the good news in their own language and to effect change from below. Since the 1960s they have provided significant leadership.

What was the secret of the Conversionary Protestant Missionaries' success?

Two parts.

Firstly they listened closely to God over many years. They heard what Paul was saying.

They developed an approach that was consistent with the fact that salvation is a gift of God to all people who believe; they developed an approach that was consistent with the nature of God's righteousness.

And secondly they paid attention to what was happening around them...and looked to see what changes God would have them bring.

And God, through his Holy Spirit, blessed their work.

Let's finish by giving a face, a story to the statistics. The story of V. S Azariah of South India illustrates both the influence of foreign missionaries and the critical influence of indigenous missionaries. The foreign missionaries were only a part of this story.

Azariah, born in 1874, was a 2nd generation Indian Christian from a poor Tamil background.

He attended mission schools and was mentored by wise missionaries.

Azariah became convinced of the importance of Indian indigenous mission and he and a group of friends started a mission in Dornakal, one of the poorest areas in Sth India.

The local Anglican bishop saw this young man's potential and fast tracked him through ordination and shortly after nominated him to be Assistant Bishop in the large diocese of Madras. Well that caused a storm. All Indian bishops at this point were Englishmen.

The British government in India and several British missionaries were opposed to this appointment. Eventually, in 1912, Azariah was appointed Bishop of a newly created diocese: the Diocese of Dornakal. The area was out of the way and there were no missionaries in this region.

This suited Azariah and the call that was laid on his heart. He was convinced that his people needed to embrace salvation through faith in Jesus. He spent his days travelling in his diocese, by bicycle or on bullock cart, spending time talking with people and preaching in the villages. His wife often travelled

with him. They often lived in a tent. Azariah trained up leaders to help in the work. Most of the people they worked with were untouchables (now called Dhalits), in the lowest Hindu caste. They were desperately poor, often treated very badly by those in higher castes. If a cow was killed by accident a riot could follow, the cow in the Hindu view is sacred. If an untouchable's shadow fell on someone from a high caste he could be killed and justice for the family was unlikely.

Azariah promoted education and founded a school for girls.

As part of his preaching he spoke against the four demons – Dirt, Disease, Debt, and Drink.

And several issues burdened him as a worker among a religious minority who were often persecuted. These are in no particular order.

That all Christians, of whatever race, or whatever denomination, should work together in love and unity. Christians needed to operate in a community of love.

(Shortly after Azariah's death several Protestant denominations of South India combined in the Church of Sth India.)

A second matter for Azariah was that every convert must be a witness. All new Christians went through careful preparation before baptism. It was expected that they would witness to the gospel through transformed lives and a zeal for evangelism.

And lastly, and somewhat controversially he asked his people, these poorest of people, to be disciplined in giving. They set aside a handful of rice out of a sack, a chicken out of the flock. The money was used to ensure that this church was self-sufficient. You will appreciate that Christian workers in Dornakal consequently had a very low salary. To make that worse: Azariah put aside some of the donated money to build the Dornakal cathedral.

The result? At this time there were mass movements to Christ in this area. Altogether around 200,000 came to faith through the work Azariah led.

Mohandas Gandhi, the leader of the independent India movement, and Azariah were contemporaries.

Azariah often supported Gandhi but after the British left India Gandhi identified Azariah as Enemy number 1.

Why? Gandhi was influenced by Christianity and he wanted to reform aspects of Hinduism, but he wanted to keep India a Hindu country. He also wanted India to be a strong independent democracy.

Hinduism is essentially a righteousness by law. If an untouchable lives a good life, then according to Hinduism they will be reincarnated into a higher caste. In the meantime their suffering was in consequence of previous sins.

Imagine for a moment a Christian untouchable woman -the lowest of the low, seen as the most undeserving - goes into the Dornakal Cathedral, the cathedral the untouchables have together to built.

It is a beautiful building, a very Indian building, you can see Hindu and Muslim aspects to the architecture. But above all, it is a Christian building. Here our Christian untouchable stands tall, she has committed herself to God and she knows that she is loved, she is made fully righteous, and she has a future ahead, with God. She knows this for herself, she has read the Bible, and she has the presence of the Holy Spirit with her.

In the face of injustice this woman is far less likely to use violent means to make changes in her country, and she is far more likely to seek justice through the courts or to join an organisation that will work for law reform. She may even start something new. She will try to make her country a better place by bringing God's ways, and as a consequence she will help to make a stable democracy in her country.

Gandhi did not understand that.

Nor has our government. They are right to see charity as a good thing but they have not understood that salvation through faith is essential to make the world a better place. The work of faithful, obedient Christian missionaries is not an optional extra because through their work God works in the world even more than they could anticipate.

God's gift of the Righteousness through faith changes us individually, it changes our communities and it blesses the world.

Paul got it exactly right:

How beautiful the feet of VS Azariah, and all those like him.