



BibleLands Annual Service (2 Oct 2010)
Address by George Kovoov, Principal of Trinity College, Bristol

Good afternoon friends,

It's a great pleasure to come and join you this afternoon in this very famous church. I heard about the Ministry of this church 30 years ago when I was in India, where a very well known Anglican Minister called David Prior used to minister here. I've never met the gentleman, never been to this church before but the ministry of this congregation is much admired and so it was a joy to be told that I would be preaching at the famous St. Michael's Chester Square. It's a joy to be here with you.

I've known about the work of BibleLands first of all through your most wonderful Bethlehem Carol Sheet. I look like an Indian and the reason is, I am one. [Lots of laughter.] I came to Britain 22 years ago as a missionary to the pagan Brits - nothing to laugh about, nothing to laugh about - the state of the Church is incredibly weak in this part of the world and we should be on our knees praying for the strengthening of Christian witness, and that is why I'm here because otherwise I should be working amongst 1.2 billion people in a very strategic part of the world which is Indian, but the only reason I'm here is because I felt God tell me to come and work here and so my church relieves me as a missionary to the British Isles.

I come from a well-established Christian family from the Syrian Orthodox tradition. I have 44 generations of clergy in my family, but I was the least likely candidate in my generation. My father was a very senior military officer, a fighter pilot in the RAF, and in the Indian Air Force. I grew up in the home of a soldier, totally secular in my upbringing. As a result of the war my father turned his back on faith, religion and God and therefore I never had the privilege of going to church as a young boy, never went to Sunday school. But I had a very powerful encounter with Jesus in my bedroom at the age of 15 and I have been serving him from that day onwards. I believe that the work of your organisation is very important because you bear witness by presence and engagement in a very strategic part of the world. I don't necessarily call it the Holy Land because I come from a country which is called the Holy Land. People come to India to wash in the River Ganges and people come on pilgrimage to India, but I will grant Palestine this, and that is that it is the land of the Holy One. The land of the Holy One and Palestine has been always a very particular friend of my country, we were one of the first to recognise the PLO, Yasser Arafat was a great friend of ours and we have had great associations with Israel. My brother was the Indian Ambassador in Israel, then the Indian High Commissioner in London and he's now the Indian Ambassador in Paris, France, and so I have had a great deal to do with this part of the world and I know a little bit because I trained to be a diplomat as well.

I thought I would use the passage from John 9:1-11 to share a few thoughts with you.

The first thing is that the apostle John wasn't writing fairy tales, he had a purpose when he wrote his Gospel and he clearly writes in the fag end of his Gospel that the reason he wrote his particular variant of the Gospel was that he had a theological trajectory. He had a theological motif and it was this - he had collected stories, events and reflections on the life of our Lord, organised it in such a way so that when people read it and heard about what he wrote they would come to believe that Jesus was the son of God. He wasn't a Prophet, he wasn't a religious teacher but he was divine. And I hope that in your presence and engagement in the land of the Holy One that you will bear witness to the particular inspiration of the Holy One. The One they call Jesus of Nazareth.

As an academic and having been the Principal of two academic institutions, one the University of Birmingham for 12 years at Selly Oak and now at the University of Bristol for the past 6 years as the Principal of Trinity College which is essentially a vicar factory, you know, I've been trying to help men of the cloth and women of the cloth to get it quite clear in their heads that we are here because of the Holy One, the One whom they call Jesus of Nazareth.

It's very interesting when you look at the world of missions. Europe and Britain have had a huge privilege in being associated with the spread of the Christian message for over 500 years. But today that same continent is a major mission field for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the seeds of faith have been planted in Africa and South America and Asia and you see people like me as the first sign of a wave of modern missionaries engaging with the questions that are confronting the Christian Gospel, engaging with the questions of Europe post modern, post Christian and trying to articulate the inspiration, the hope, the joy and the vitality of following the One they called Jesus of Nazareth. But what we have today is a global church, for Anglicans, I always tell my Anglican friends, because you do realise I'm not an Anglican. The Anglicans give me titles but I was ordained in the Church of North India though ethnically from the Syrian Orthodox church and the church of North India is an amalgam, a union of 7 denominations of which the Anglicans, the Methodists, the Baptists, the Congregationalists, the Lutherans and the Moravians and the Presbyterians, we didn't have the vegetarians but they're all there [laughter]; and so in this one fragile body I'm an ecumenical schizophrenic but living here I bear witness to that.

For the first time since the third century the church of Jesus Christ is, in the main, poor. For the first 300 years the Church of Jesus Christ was a very fragile, vulnerable committee of very poor people. It was the conversion of Constantine which meant that it became the established faith and had all the powers associated with Imperial Rome. But for the first time since the third century the demographic centre of Christendom has relocated back to the global south and as a result the Church of Jesus Christ is once again a poor vulnerable community. And the Church in the western hemisphere is equally vulnerable and the money is running out on them, and the Church here is aging gracefully and our young people are voting with their feet and we need to be able to read the signs of our times very clearly and to be able to present a Christian message

that is not boring, because that is what they tell me, 'we don't go to church because it is boring'. And therefore I don't train pussycats at Trinity I train tigers who are not boring, because I am committed to the growth of the Church of Christ in this part of the world. But it is non-western reflections on the biblical text, that I have been opening up to academic institutions which in the main have been Euro-centric which is a huge act of self deprivation because global epistemology is such that we are growing in our understandings of things. It is Korean theologians who experience explosions of church growth that began to notice in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, an interesting word in the Greek and it was a word that was associated with the name of Jesus, every time the name Jesus in the Greek text was mentioned *Iesous*, there would invariably be another Greek word which would come which was the Greek word *Okhlos* and the Greek *Okhlos* translates into English and the word is the crowds and the multitude. When we look at the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke you invariably find the crowds and the multitudes being the context within which the Ministry of Jesus is set and therefore the incarnation only makes sense when He came and lived amongst us and He lived amongst the crowds and the multitudes. The Ministry was not fashioned nor forged on the angle of ecclesiastical antics both in a temple or in the synagogue but it was patterned on the angle of the patterns and rhythms of human society. And there we need to be configured to be outward looking, engaging with the world within which we live, and not developing the syndrome of living in cloud cuckoo land, playing our own variant of Church. It's a game that nobody wants to join in, the very few, but the House of the Lord is a House of prayer for all people. And so the work of BibleLands is important as you engage in transformational activity in the region. But the transformation is not a matter of being an economic miracle or a political stabilisation, it is bearing witness to the power of the work of the presence of God to touch the human condition, to move us from being self-centred, to move us from being petty, to move us from being insular and to get a life and to bear witness to the word abundance which the One they call Jesus of Nazareth offers us. Abundance.

In this particular story we're introduced to Jesus moving with his students, he's interacting with them, he's teaching them, he's mentoring them, he's investing in them. And there is an interesting narrative - the story of Jesus and this blind man. In other Gospels the blind people are often named, the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus in Mark 10, but here we are presented with an anonymous man blind from birth. Now, when we see human need the normal human response to human need is to be of some form of service, there is a response that is required. But the problem with theologians is such that we are far more interested in hypothetical issues, in fact when we see the man born blind the response of the Apostles is interesting, they almost sound like they were a bunch of Brahmin Hindus. They focus on the issue of karma, bad karma. In the Bible lands it's probably the word kismet but kismet is different from karma. Karma is cause and effect, kismet is that it is ordained, it's not causal and what the Disciples say is this is a case of karma, is the cause of his blindness the result of the sins of his forebears - his parents - or his own? What is interesting is that the Apostles reduce human suffering to an abstraction which then reduced it to being safe space so that we could ponder and talk and reflect and have interesting musings about the reality of the human state and the condition of pain suffering the human dilemma. Somebody said to me that philosophy could be likened to an individual going into a dark room searching for a black

cat. If that is the case then theology might be likened to an individual going into a black room to search for a black cat that's not there. [Laughter]

That is why John writing his Gospel has an agenda, he has an intention, and I do hope that BibleLands has a Christian agenda, a Christian intention. 'Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God', Matthew 5:8. Blessed are those who are peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God. My reflection is if you can see God, you can see that the reconciling work of God is the work of the father, and therefore we join in the family business which is that of reconciliation and peace and therefore we enter into this work and that's why we are called blessed are the peacemakers for we shall be called the children of God. But if you look at the great peacemakers starting from Jesus to Gandhi to Anwar Sadat to Begin to Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King, we know blessed are they that are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Peacemaking is deadly dangerous, peacemaking is incredibly risky and if you look at the trail blazing of all the great peacemakers, most of them were assassinated. And so when BibleLands talks about your own engagement and your own presence, we need to recognise the risks involved, the challenges involved but it's got to be worth it. Jesus sets the heresy straight, immediately but firmly putting down this idea that human suffering or the case of this individual's disability had nothing to do with sin, either his or his forebears, but he saw and offers us a theological insight which is when we see human need, when we see people in need, can we create space for God to get involved? The context of human need is an invitation to bring God into the equation so that God can bring about the transformation. The important thing for us is that when we pray, and prayer is incredibly political, prayer is incredibly subversive because when we pray we are sticking our neck out by intentionally bringing the concern before the throne of God. But the question is, are we prepared to be part of God's solution to our own prayers. Prayer is subversive because we are committed and have an agenda and therefore we are prepared to be the solution as we have the privilege of articulating the context of human need.

Are you with me? I hope I'm coherent and clear. Forgive me if my English is not good; it's not my language.

And so to look at the issue of blindness. Blindness is a metaphor, in the Bible it is associated with not just the physical disability but blindness is a condition, the blindness of the heart, the callousness of the heart, the insensitivity of the heart, the inability to feel, to be empathic and to be passionate and compassionate. The blindness of the mind, living in a state of darkened ignorance and prejudice. And these forms of blindness often lead people to an unhealthy state of dependence which we call begging. Jesus engages with this individual's need. What he does is something which fits into the pattern of the Judeo Christian prophetic heritage. He does a prophetic act by taking mud and scooping it like the creator in the book of Genesis, he takes dirt, he spits into it and the act of spitting you have the symbolic image of the brew of the breath of God into that. I wonder whether he fashioned an eyeball and shoved it into the empty socket and told the guy, go have a bath, which he did at the pool of Siloam, and we are told that at the moment he did that, like Naaman, the great Syrian General, who would go to dip 7 times in the Jordan, he comes out whole in the same way this particular individual comes out of the sea.

My brothers and sisters as you engage in this very important work in helping to articulate the needs of the lands of the Holy One and the region and the concerns of people, you have a prophetic role in both speaking truth into that context, but bringing before the needs of the people of God and asking the Church to be more strategic in its subversive act of worship and prayer. Because when we pray we breathe life and hope which spills out into creative engagement and involvement, for that my brothers and sisters is the way of the One they called Jesus of Nazareth.

May God bless us.

4 October 2010