

The Difference Jesus Makes

Brian Stewart's award-winning life in journalism has taken him to ten different war zones and to interview such famous people as Lech Walesa, Nelson Mandela, Margaret Thatcher and Henry Kissinger. He spoke at the 160th convocation of Toronto's Knox College in 2004 and his speech included this:

Many people think that organized mainstream Christianity has become a fading force. But from what I've seen as a reporter over several decades, nothing is further from the truth. I've found there is no alliance more determined and dogged in action than church workers, when mobilized for a common good. It is these Christians who are on the frontlines of committed humanity today. When I want to find that front, I follow their trail. This vast front stretches from the most impoverished reaches of the developing world to the hectic struggle to preserve caring values in our own towns and cities. I have never been able to reach these frontlines without finding Christian volunteers already in the thick of it, mobilizing congregations that care and being a faithful witness to truth.

At the start of my career I had largely abandoned religion, for I too regarded the Church as a rather tiresome irrelevance. What ultimately persuaded me otherwise was the reality of Christianity's mission, physically and in spirit before my very eyes.

He tells a moving story of covering the murderous civil war in El Salvador in the early 1980's and how his team had determined to be back in the city before nightfall each day to avoid the death squads. Once they were caught out late and were being asked to stay with some refugees to act as a buffer between them and the killers. Along came three Christian aid workers who insisted that the journalists get to safety while they stayed with the refugees and tried to prevent a massacre.

He continued:

I can hardly tell you how common such action is. Somewhere in El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala or Brazil, volunteers from a local parish are out trying to protect the weakest from political or criminal attacks, saying, "You don't harm them without coming through us first!"

In 1984 I, along with BBC's Michael Buerk, first carried the story of the Great Ethiopian famine on television. The world reacted, as we all know, and TV was given much of the credit for saving millions. But we were not the first. We went because for months church and aid groups on the ground had seen famine coming and had been beseeching the world to take notice. When we finally managed to get in, against considerable Ethiopian government resistance, it was these groups that showed us where to go, gave us rides on their relief flights into the mountains and mapped out where and how the world had to react.

After a day in the field, filming volunteers at work, we'd be sitting back over our

nightly drink and one of us would say something like: "Strange people those, know what I mean? There's just something different about them. They've got something that we don't."

C.S. Lewis wrote of Christianity producing a "good infection". Christian work on the frontlines infects those around them, even those who are not Christian with a sense of Christ's deep mystery and power. I've felt it. It changes the world. Still.

The baby born in Bethlehem, the Messiah come to choirs of angels and the awe of shepherds, grew up, taught and healed people, died and rose again from death, and then left, but didn't leave. He forever changed the world.

Christianity has no shortage of critics, none of whom is an unbiased observer. Everyone who speaks against Christ has an axe to grind and, most often, it is because he or she doesn't like the implications of a God who commands them to stop sinning and become like Him. Some of these critics have legitimate complaints against the church for some failure that has wounded or angered them. But none can look at the whole picture of what the followers of Christ has done to produce good in this world and fail to be amazed, impressed, even grateful. Over the next few weeks, I want to share with you the history of goodness that has been produced through the love and faithfulness of Jesus-followers, in the midst of a world that lurches ever-onward towards greater evil.

Through His life on this earth, Jesus clearly influenced a number of people towards good. Although many who heard Him teach or were blessed by His miracles were never heard from again, there were 120 who met in a room in Jerusalem, waiting for the promise of the Spirit that Jesus had given them before returning to His Father. The mission of the Kingdom of God on this earth was totally dependent on those 120 people.

You know the story from the book of Acts. The promised Holy Spirit came, the people gathered in prayer and waiting for the promise were filled with boldness and passion for the message of good news, the gospel. They spilled into the streets, preaching the resurrection of Jesus, healing the sick, promising forgiveness, speaking in the languages of all the pilgrims from all over the Middle East and North Africa who had come for the feast. People were converted, were persecuted, moved to the far reaches of the Roman Empire, proclaiming the news of Jesus' resurrection and His promise of new life to all who would believe. That's how our New Testament ends, in the early 60's, about 30 years after the resurrection and the beginning of the church.

The Romans were spiritual kin to the typical Canadian of our day. They were syncretistic, which means that they saw value in all religious beliefs and wanted to be "inclusive". They were proud of the Pantheon in Rome that displayed and honoured all gods. They would have welcomed Jesus into that Pantheon if it were not for the Christians' annoying claim that there is only one God and the Christians' refusal to bow their knees to any other, except their Lord. Christians also refused to pour

libations on the altars that honoured pagan gods and goddesses.

The reaction of the Romans was muted for the first three decades, but as the number of Christians grew and as their opposition to “Roman ways” became more obvious because of their numbers, a backlash was inevitable. It started in 64 A.D., under the rule of the Emperor Nero. Nero took away the Christian status as “legal religion” which they shared with the Jews and made them to be a nontolerated, illegal religion. According to Tacitus, who was a leading Roman official and friend of the Emperor Trajan, “an immense multitude” of Christians suffered persecution under the rule of Nero. They were crucified, set aflame in Nero’s gardens for people to watch, clothed in animal skins and then attacked by vicious dogs . . . and not just because they refused to bow down to statues of the pagan gods of Rome, but because they lived by a new and radically different morality. They lived in a way that set them apart from the rest of the Roman world.

In Pliny’s report to the Emperor Trajan, he wrote that the Christians, “bound themselves by a solemn oath not to do any wicked deeds, never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up.” Another pagan observer, the Greek physician Galen, in about 126 A.D. described them as practicing “self-discipline and self-control in matters of food and drink . . . and in their pursuit of justice, attaining a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers.” Christian moral behaviour also meant that they didn’t support the typical practices of public life under Roman rule. This complaint from the Romans is recorded by a Christian, Minucius Felix: “You do not attend our shows; you take no part in the processions; you are not present at our public banquets; you abhor the sacred games (the gladiators’ fighting in the ring).”

The Christians’ morality threw them in stark opposition to the common practices of Rome: abortion, infanticide, the very common practice of abandoning infants, suicide, the power of a father to control the lives of all members of his family, the degradation of women and homosexuality. This may well have been the deeper and more lasting reason why Christians in the first three centuries of the church suffered persecution from quite a number of Roman Emperors who ruled during that period.

Contrast these two pictures: Nero, before he was 30 years old, had killed two of his wives, then killed his step-brother, sexually molested boys and forced many Romans to commit suicide. In disguise he roamed the streets at night with friends, mugging women and stealing from shops. He was a powerful emperor and he used his power in a way that would not be out of place in the world of his day.

The second picture is of the guild workers, many of whom were becoming Christians through the witness of their fellow workers. They saw the Christian workers taking care of their families, showing love to their wife and children, demonstrating compassion towards the weak, especially looking out for widows and orphans, those without any other source of help. They saw some go to the garbage heaps in search of abandoned babies and then raising those children as if they were their own.

Now, which of those pictures is most like our day? Both. One, I would argue, is the picture of civil life that remains after centuries of Christian influence on the making of laws, on the treatment of the poor, on the rights of those who were, in Roman times, treated as not worth keeping. The other is the picture of what's been overtaking our culture over the last 40 years: a growing disregard for life, both those who have not yet been born and those who are living at the older end of the age scale. We've seen more of the irresponsibility, particularly of men, who abandon their children and their children's mother in order to keep their options open, all the while expecting the state to look after those they've abandoned.

What Jesus gave to the world, in addition to the salvation promised by the prophets, was a new kind of person, a man or woman who would live and die for a cause of greater worth than anything Rome, or any subsequent civilization, had ever seen. There is no record that any of the believers ever attacked their persecutors, ever sought revenge on those who killed their leaders or confiscated their property or refused them work. Everything they did pointed to a higher cause, a greater power even than the might of Rome. Many thousands were martyred, like the disciple of John, Polycarp, who was dragged into the stadium and told to swear by the genius of the emperor and to curse Christ. His reply: "Eighty and six years have I served Him and He never did me any injury; how can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?" Before the day was over, he was burned at the stake.

But the persecution and martyrdoms had a great impact on the people who watched them. The church continued to grow at a rapid pace as people who watched how the Christians lived and died were moved to become followers of Jesus. The number of Christians grew from 120 waiting for the Spirit in Jerusalem to, less than 300 years later, somewhere between 6 and 10 million people. The Roman Empire at the time consisted of about 60 million. And the empire had never seen anything like this: people willing to endure torture and cruel death because of love for their Redeemer, Jesus. A pagan military commander in the Roman army in 286 named Maurice, was so impressed by the way the Christians refused to renounce their Lord, even under extreme pressure, that he in turn refused to carry out his orders to execute Christians -- and he was executed for his stance.

Pagan Rome, with all its heartless cruelty, with all its sexual sin, and with all its arrogant mockery of those who were weak or in need, was the fruit of its pagan religion. There was no promise in paganism, no assurance of eternal life or offer of forgiveness. None of the pagan gods claimed to have risen from the dead -- in fact, they exhibited all the frailties and passions and weaknesses of the men and women who worshiped them. In the words of Alvin Schmidt, who wrote the book How Christianity Changed the World, "Paganism had no transforming spiritual power." The emperors could fuss and fume and do their worst in their attempts to destroy the Christian faith, but the believers had experienced something that paganism could never offer them -- the life of Christ within, the power of the Holy Spirit performing wonders, giving grace, guiding their lives. The empire was, in truth, powerless in the absolute sense, in that they could not eliminate the Christian faith by persecuting

Jesus' followers, because the Christian faith was made of something that changed people's lives and made them different in the most positive way imaginable.

Jesus came to earth in a time when the ideas of the classic Greek philosophers had had time to settle into the culture. He came at a time when rulers were fearful enough of being assassinated that they tried to please the people -- to a degree. Jesus came in a time of relative peace, when the empire was stable and the population quite safe. Jesus came in a time when, despite all these advantages there were many signs of heartlessness, self-indulgence and pride. He challenged those things and His followers picked up the challenge and took it to the furthest ends of the empire ... and beyond. What they did was to love, as Christ had loved them, and to love everyone; including the abandoned baby, the starving widow and the cruel tyrant emperor.

It was the power in this love that ultimately brought the Roman Empire into submission. It was, undoubtedly, the godly influence of Valeria, a devout Christian who was married to the co-emperor Galerius, a persecutor of the church. Galerius became very ill in 310, with the same disease that had taken Herod the Great, and he repented of persecuting Christians and published the *Edict of Toleration* in 311, which allowed Christians to worship and even to build church buildings. And then there was the influence of Helena, another devout Christian, who just happened to be the mother of Constantine, the man who, as Emperor from 313 on, most radically freed the Christian church from those trying to destroy it.

It is only blind prejudice that would say that Christianity has done little to change the world, or that the changes would have happened anyway. There are, of course, changes that take place over time. Even the Romans finally decided that crucifixion was simply too cruel, too horrible a form of execution and they banned it. (Constantine was the emperor who did this) But those changes happen slowly and they didn't change the basic values that dominated Roman society. Christianity did, radically. The Western world shifted away from the self-indulgence and cruelty that was produced by the paganism of Greece and Rome and towards an ethic of love and goodness towards others that was inspired by our King, who did good to all and who willingly gave His life for the sins of the world.

Let's think about what lessons are in this for us.

1. Jesus' followers have changed the world for good, not by running crusades to Palestine, nor by attempting to influence the outcomes of elections, nor by trying to force our morality on a population that rejects it. Jesus' followers have changed the world by living in a different way, not the way of armies and politics and guilt manipulation, but the way of sacrificial love, the way that gets to the front lines before the media does, the way that suffers in the Roman arenas with confidence in our Lord. What we learn from that is that we are called as Christians to a radically different approach to life than what the world touts as being normal. The early Christians were not normal -- they were much better than normal. They were compassionate, they

lived to a high moral standard, they loved sacrificially and their lives were beautiful to those who observed them. We could again bless the world if we had the courage to be different.

2. Don't envy the world for its so-called freedom, because it is just one long advertisement for selfishness and for living an undisciplined life. Freedom is a funny word. Most of us think of freedom as the ability to go where you want and to do what you want, but God says that this understanding of freedom is incorrect. Always doing what your old, sinful nature pulls you toward is actually a form of slavery, of bondage to that old nature. We are called to live in the true freedom of the children of God, free to do what we were created to do, to live for His glory and to bless the world with goodness and grace. Let's live to our calling.