



THE NEW SHOFAR

Jesus is the filter through whom we see life

Easter 5: Jesus Christ overcomes death and darkness

A story from Papua New Guinea:

When I was a wee missionary, I was stationed in a parish in the foothills of the Torricelli Mountains, inland from Aitape. The parish was called Ningil and it covered a large area of swampy tropical rainforest and kunai plains. A great spot to learn the ropes and to get to know how to listen to Papua New Guineans with whom I was working. These were among the best years of my life.

On one occasion I ventured up into the Mountains to talk to some of the older men I had come to know. I wanted to hear from them the story of the coming of the German missionaries who had first evangelised the area. I had been forced to deal with lots of criticism from friends and others about the damage being done to traditional customs and indigenous religious beliefs. I thought it would be interesting to listen to what the older men and women had to say about that.

A world of war, distrust and violence

The country has a population of just under 8 million people and yet has somewhere around 1,000 languages! On top of this you can add dialects and variations. It creates obvious challenges as the nation seeks to live in our contemporary world. Some of these were spoken by as few as 200 people!

If we go back in time to pre-settlement times, each of these groups of peoples grew up in isolation from each other – with the exception of some trading links. Imagine the challenges living in a village where the entire world was made up of what they could see from the highest point around. Their myths, sciences, histories, religions were developed independently from other villages around them.



The reality was that the people on the next ridge were often their mortal enemies. For centuries they had been at war and contacts, when they took place, were often associated with violence, murders, abduction of the women and raiding of gardens. They had almost no way of interacting apart from a relationship of violence.

Into a world of darkness comes the Light of the World

There are lots of great stories about the first contacts but over a number of years, the people finally came to know Christ and to seek baptism. By the time the Australian Franciscans arrived on the scene most of the villages had become Christian. It is at this

point our original question comes into play: what differences did the coming of the Good News make to their way of life?

The men put the answer very simply and succinctly. Instead of seeing the “other” as an enemy, as a threat to all they held dear, their enemies became brothers and sisters in Christ. In their words – Jesus now stood between us. Previously we would go into battle or carry out some act of violence against them when we encountered them in the bush but through faith we began to see the world differently. Now we have Jesus in the middle, and we understand “them” in the way Jesus would have seen “them”. Jesus now stood between the people in the village and the people on the next ridge. The two peoples, different in language and customs could be together because of Jesus who formed a bridge to a new life. The invitation to a new world was open to them.

They finished by telling me of a ceremony they called *brukim spia* – breaking of the spear. The two tribes came together, and as a part of a liturgical ceremony, the elders broke their war spears and gave the broken pieces to the other tribe. No more, they pledged, would differences be hindrances.

Why is that so difficult today?

Back in Australia I am saddened to find how far from reality this proves to be in our own culture, particularly in our faith communities we proclaim to be a part of the Body of Christ in the world. People all too easily become opponents, “enemies” who hold a position on parish life different to my own. We cannot understand them and fail to take the steps necessary to see the world through their eyes and their experiences. Instead, we all too easily seek to take the moral high ground by insisting they are ‘wrong’ and must take the first steps towards being reconciled. Hard to see this kind of thinking in the death of Jesus on the cross. Our PNG friends could. And did. Jesus changed them.

Could someone please explain to me the logic behind deciding not to come to Church and worship with others because I have been, in some way or another, offended or hurt by something said, done or not said and not done. Where is that kind of discipleship to be found in the witness of Jesus? How do we reconcile that with the responses of missionaries and martyrs who gave their lives for the Gospel? Or how does that match up with our brothers and sisters in places like PNG?

It all comes down to faith and whether ours is living, is real. It is one thing to profess our faith, another entirely to live it. To transform the world into the Kingdom of God we will have to suffer. We will be called upon to lay our lives on the line, willing to put aside our own selves and preferences so that others may know God’s healing love and mercy. There can be no easy way out, no alternative ways of serving God, of collaborating with the divine works of grace already unfolding all around us.

There is too much “me” in the world and now we find it is eating its way into the Church and the missionary activities of believers. If Christians have anything of value to offer the world it must be the willingness to put aside the self and to see in the “other” the face of Christ. In case we think this is all a little too simplistic, all we need to do is observe the decline in every aspect of Church and ask “why?”