

“The invasive, subversive movement of God” – sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin, New Zealand, by Kerry Enright, 27 July 2014. Readings Romans 8:26 – 39, John 13: 31-33, 44-52.

“The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field.”

The last foreign missionaries were expelled from China by the Communists in 1953. Some of those missionaries were associated with this Church. At the time, the expulsion was seen by mission organisations as a disaster. They had invested so much over many years with seemingly little reward. When they left it was estimated there were only 700,000 Christians in China. Then in 1969, Mao instigated the Cultural Revolution to rid China of capitalist reactionaries and finally of religion. Churches and mosques and temples were closed. Religious activity was banned. Yet, when the Cultural Revolution ended in 1980 and Deng Xiaoping allowed greater religious freedom, there were estimated to be 30 times the number of Christians there were in 1950.

How did that happen?

Three years ago, a group of us were hosted by the China Christian Council, the official Protestant Church in China. We went to Nanjing, to the first Church to be reopened after the Cultural Revolution. We met the minister and he gave an answer to the intriguing question. When public worship stopped, people worshipped in homes, secretly. His father was an elder of the Church, and during the Revolution, his father visited members of the Church at night, under cover of darkness, encouraging them in their faith, praying with them, studying the Bible with them, offering them pastoral care. That is what the elders of the Church did and then people did it with each other. People's homes became little cells of faith, and gradually, quietly, steadily, in secret they multiplied. Fearful people taking a terrible risk – they knew what would happen if they were discovered. This activity continued, in a subterranean way for thirty years, surreptitiously, secretly, behind closed doors, beyond public gaze. Some Christians were caught and imprisoned. Many weren't. And now, in that city, at Easter and Christmas time, the Police have to direct traffic to and from the Church, because thousands of Chinese want to find out what Christianity is about. There are at least 23 million members of the China Christian Council, and there are Catholics and Orthodox and home churches as well. It is estimated that there are ninety million Christians in China, and the Church there continues to grow.

The Christian movement is a grassroots movement. It networks, one person at a time, one group at a time, one town at a time, one conversation at a time. So, today, the proportion of Christians in the world continues to grow.

It has been like that from the beginning.

Within two and a half centuries the followers of Jesus went from being a small band of several hundred Palestinian Jews to be a major social force. Scholars have identified key factors.

One was their sense of being a network across divisions. One of the least read chapters of the New Testament is Romans Chapter 16 - it contains a long list of names not easily pronounced. The Apostle Paul says to the Romans -

³ Greet Prisca and Aquila ... Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives¹ who were in prison with me; Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord ...

So it goes on, one name after another. Now the surprising thing is that Paul had not visited Rome. But he knew the people – by name; he had heard of them or met them, and they remained in his heart, in his prayers as part of the movement, so he wanted them to be greeted, name after name.

From this sense of solidarity grew care for each other and others. The Jerusalem Church set up a large daily food roster for the destitute among them, and they saw it as so important seven Christian leaders managed it. By AD 250 the Christian community in Rome was supporting 1500 destitute people every day. All around the Mediterranean, churches were setting up food programs, hospitals and orphanages; available to believers and unbelievers alike.

Consistent with Jewish piety, the Jesus people took care of widows and buried the dead.

Remarkably, the movement spread so significantly that the Roman Emperors felt threatened. The Emperor Julian wrote in AD 362, (the atheism of which he writes is because Christians did not worship the Emperor/God) -

“Why do we observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism?”

Rodney Stark –

“Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues – that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful ... This was revolutionary stuff. Indeed, it was the cultural basis for the revitalisation of the Roman world groaning under a series of miseries ... Christianity ... prompted liberating social relations between the sexes and within the family ... and greatly modulated class differences. Finally, what Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than their humanity.”

The Christian movement conveyed a sense of human worth. It taught that every person - man, woman, child, slave, barbarian, no matter who - is made in the image of God and is

therefore of enormous value in the eyes of God. And it did this by valuing each person with care, name after name.

The mustard plant is a weed. It's an invasive, pernicious, subversive weed, and it becomes at best a weedy bush. It's small and grows low to the ground and it's very hard to get rid of.

The God movement, said Jesus, is like this darned mustard seed. It looks small. It looks innocuous. It looks harmless. But watch out! When it takes root, it invades your garden. And you cannot weed it out. It changes everything.

Jesus parodied Ezekiel who had used similar words to speak of a grand cedar, a big tree.

"Under [the cedar] every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind" (17:23).

Jesus is saying, not the mighty cedar, not the grand display, not the great and marvellous, not the high and mighty, but a weed, an invasive, subversive network, that works by word of mouth, by sacrificial care, by one person to one person – this weed, this rule of God, this movement of God, will change the world.

All of this says something to us. Inner city churches with grand buildings in prime locations can imagine this is what makes them Church. But it's not. It's not primarily about what is grand or solid or distinguished or settled. The Church is us, how we care for each other, how we care for others, how we network and pray and express our faith.

Donald Stuart, the first minister of Knox, knew that. Yes, he was involved in the University and the Schools - great institutions, grand cedars. But all of it was built on what he did with people, with the names he wrote on tiny pieces of paper and left in his coat pocket that now rest in our archives. Our future is not the cedar of Lebanon – it's the weedy mustard plant – grassroots, spreading, one conversation at a time, one person at a time, one community at a time.

Let's go looking for Jesus – the weed among weeds, the treasure buried in unlikely fields, in unobtrusive places – and when we find him, let's follow him. With him, we will subvert the world as one human being after another learns how much they are worth.