

"A more excellent way..."

Getting Gods heart for our community - rather than just grabbing a good idea.

There are lots of inspiring stories about these days of how groups and churches and individuals are reaching out and doing things to bless people in their communities. This is a refreshing change from the depressing cry of former decades about how 'hard it is' to evangelise these days.

But I wonder if there is a temptation to just 'grab and go' – to grab someone else's successful plan and get on with it, trusting it will bring the same fruitfulness? We do this because we are tired of fruitlessness and impatient to be more successful. But the great ideas of others that inspire us are not necessarily going to be the right way for our group to reach out. There is 'a more excellent way;' a way of showing God's love, of demonstrating his character that *particularly suits* the people around us that he wants to bless. This way will not only prove more fruitful, it will shape us as a people, which is a major part of what God is about. There is a development of faith and expectation and fruitfulness that comes no other way.

When we examine the gospel stories we see that Jesus was always alert to what his Father was doing. He was attuned to where the Father was at work and what he had in mind. This is the first essential step, if we are to avoid the 'grab and go' mentality that can eventually lead to discouragement. Being a listening people is essential to being on target, with our hearts right and our timing right. We are partnering with God in the way he intends his Kingdom to advance. We need to cultivate this art, over a period of time, and not just hope that a couple of sessions one week will do it. Learning to listen together is both challenging and inspiring. Discerning together what God is saying is in itself a great preparation for ministering together as his body. Hidden gifts and graces can emerge. An appreciation of how much we need to honour and receive from one another will become the vital qualities we will need for sustained ministry.

Jesus was deeply touched by the condition of the people he met. We see him feeling both indignation and compassion when he met a leper. We hear his broken heart over his beloved Jerusalem as he expressed his intense longing to shelter and protect them – and his great pain at their rejection and coming destruction. He looked at the crowds and saw they were helpless and harried, like sheep without a shepherd and he felt deep compassion.

The way of Jesus is one of feeling deep compassion for the people we are to reach out to. I heard a man talk of coming back from a holiday in France, and crying on the plane all the way home, as God broke his heart for that country. Sometimes a deep grief is felt. Sometimes a yearning to show them the love of God fills us. It moves us to groan and pray, sometimes for hours or days. Sometimes we just keep saying 'Lord, what can I do? What do you want from me?' We feel a deep compulsion to be available to meet this need and the ache he gives us seeks for an outlet. This is the work of the Spirit, showing us the heart of God for the lost and the broken, the harried and the helpless ones around us. *This is essential for beginning to reach out.* If we just have good ideas and not broken hearts, we will miss his direction, his nuances. We will be in danger of just 'doing an outreach' and missing listening to the very ones he wants to reach. We need to feel his heart, in order to do his work. We need his compassion in order to feel his compulsion. It will push us through the sacrifice into the joy. It will give us perseverance and courage when we hit the wall and need to break through a barrier. It will give us creativity as we decide we 'have to find a way' to reach the needy. It will drive us to enlarging our faith in His ability to do the impossible.

As we take time to pray and seek the Lord we become aware of our priestly responsibility.

WE ordinary people have been given responsibility for the spiritual atmosphere of our community. Our prayers will affect the way these people respond to God. Our prayers 'prepare the soil' for the rain (the Spirit) and the seed (the Word) and the eventual harvest of souls into the Kingdom of God. We dare not just get excited about doing good to others, without first soaking the area and our plans in much prayer. When we become aware of this priestly responsibility our whole attitude to prayer changes. We begin to see with 'kingdom eyes' and can feel prayer bubbling up at any time of the day or night. We get a sharpened sense of 'partnering with God' in his work to redeem this world. It causes determination and persistence to become constant in us. We get out of the 'hit and run' mentality where we go out occasionally and then run back to safe church activities.

Something else begins to happen as we regularly seek God. Faith enlarges. We get glimpses of what can be – as we partner together in agreement with God and each other. Confidence rises as we 'taste' in prayer what God wants in reality. He often gives visions and dreams, pictures and words that help us 'see' with our mind and spirit what it will be like when he comes and changes situations and people. This is how faith grows, as we hear his word to us, and see the possibility of him invading the situations around us. It often helps to pray Scripture that speaks of God's heart for restoration and his determination to do it, such as Jeremiah 24:6-7, "I will watch over them for their good... I will bring them back... I will build them up and not tear them down... I will give them a heart to know me... they will return to me with all their heart." As we pray such scriptures we get to really believe that it is happening and we are a part of it!

There is a further development that happens. Generosity starts to mushroom. We begin to give sacrificially... WITH JOY! Our time, our money, our skills, our 'stuff'. We become outrageous givers before we even know it! Such is the infectious nature of the Kingdom when we start on this road of seeing our communities as Jesus does.

I love the stories of the early Salvation Army. Their method was to take a team to a new town and begin with prayer – much prayer – often whole nights of prayer. Then they would go to the homes of the worst 'sinners' (the drunkards who beat their wives) and take food to the families, and clean up the home. They would pray with the family and talk to the man about his need for God. After many visits the man often came to the meeting and found the Lord. His testimony of transformation was a catalyst for many of his drinking buddies to respond to God also. Prayer – faith – compassion – boldness – scrubbing dirty houses – feeding hungry families – prayer and more prayer – declaring the gospel – testimonies of transformed lives and restored families. Soon the whole town was abuzz with the power of the kingdom and the goodness of God. Testimonies are a powerful way of multiplying the power of God. Faith is released for the same thing to happen again as people listen. Can we imagine this happening in our communities? Yes! Why not!

What is on God's heart? Are we listening? What does he feel about our community? Have we asked him? Bill Pierce – the founder of World Vision said, "***Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.***" What a dangerous prayer! Will you pray it? Will you pray it until he does it? It is the way of love, the way of faith, the way of enlargement and fruitfulness. What a privilege is ours to partner with this amazing God of redemption and mercy.

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