

Michael Frost : Exiles – living missionally in a post-Christian culture

Hendrikson 2006

Summary by Alison Morgan, March 08 (www.alisonmorgan.co.uk)

A challenging and stimulating book. The best part is the discussion of church as not a community (support group) but a *communitas* (community for action) – ‘the *raison d’être* of the church is mission’.

This book is written for those Christians who find themselves falling into the cracks between contemporary secular Western culture and a quaint, old-fashioned church culture of respectability and conservatism...

Part 1 – Dangerous memories

1. The memory: God will rescue the exiled people

‘An epoch of history [Christendom] that shaped the contemporary church has crashed like a wave on the shore and left the church high and dry’. Christendom had become the metanarrative for an entire epoch. Christianity moved from begin a dynamic, revolutionary, social and spiritual movt to being a static religious institution with its attendant structures, priesthood, and sacraments.

Only a minority now believe in absolute moral truth. If you ask people how they make moral decisions, 1/3rd say on the basis of ‘whatever feels right or comfortable in a situation’.

Stuart Murray says if current rate of decline in UK continues, the Methodist church will have zero membership by 2037, the Ch of Scotland by 2033, the Church in Wales by 2020.

We need to rediscover ourselves as exiles – Brueggemann’s claim. Exiles yearn to live ‘freely, dangerously and tenaciously in a world where faith does not have its own way’. We are focussed too much on holding our ground to have any confidence in imagining a robust future for ourselves. Exiles are driven back to their most dangerous memories, they practice dangerous promises, offer a dangerous critique of society, and sing dangerous songs which speak of an unexpected newness of life.

Dangerous memories – the gospels are not soothing bedtime stories for baptized children, they are the most dangerous element of the Christian experience. Watership Down – rabbits who go against rabbit instincts, and live dangerously in order to survive. Dangerous criticism – cp Daniel. The most powerful religion today is materialism.

Remember the signs of the Christian Church have always been – the Lion, the Lamb, the Dove, and the Fish... but never the chameleon. Dangerous songs – many revolutions have been birthed through song – the French in 1789, the Bolsheviks, the South Africans, the Chinese. *So much of our preaching is so overly concerned with the technical questions of getting the truth right that preachers have squeezed all the life out of the gospel. We have thought of the gospel as a fragile and precious object and have held it too tightly, rendering it shapeless and uninteresting.*

2. Jesus the exile: Jesus was a radical and a subversive

Story of painter Murillo as a child, altering a painting of devout boy Jesus to tousled grinning one – we too need to paint over unreal, symbolic images of Jesus that many people carry; we need to recover the wonder of reading Jesus through the eyes of the gospel writers. The creeds are very conceptual – but the earliest witnesses stuck to the facts – their message was located in action, about a real man eating and drinking and teaching, crucified and buried and resurrected. We have encased Jesus in abstract theology, and domesticated him to let us off the hook of discipleship. Just look at Renaissance depictions of the infant Jesus.. We make Jesus grand, saviour like, different – but if the gospel refers to the events of his life that show him to be the Messiah, the appropriate response is not adoration but personal allegiance. Any basic gospel study shows how the lordship of Christ is revealed/couched in everyday, ordinary places. Eg Cana, which shatters the partition between sacred and profane. Accused of being a glutton and drunkard? ‘Eat and drink in remembrance of me’.. But we’ve turned the communion table from a place where everyone can share in the bounty offered by Jesus to a symbol of the separation between holy and unholy. Caravaggio got it right.

3. Following Jesus into exile: Jesus is our standard and example

‘Recently in Texas I met a young Christian who mistakenly thought I was interested in cool new ways of doing church services’. Incarnational Christian witness will include (as Jesus’ own ministry included):

- Active participation in the life of the host community
- Employment of language and thought forms of those with whom we seek to share Jesus – he didn’t use religious jargon
- Preparedness to go to the people, not expecting them to come to us

- Confidence that the gospel can be communicated through ordinary means – service, relationships, good deeds

The best place for building proximity with members of a host culture is often in a third place – places where people go to take it easy and commune with one another – coffee shops, community centres, bars, wherever people congregate (term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenberg). 1st place = home, 2nd place = work, 3rd place = café, bar, pub etc. Most Christians let their church become their third place – they haven't time to go to local community meeting places.

Practising the presence of Christ – Brother Lawrence, C17th, created new rule observable in midst of daily life:

- Seek God's presence: Guard your heart to retain purity – confess your sin and recognise God's presence is achievable in spite of it
- See God's presence: Keep the soul's gaze fixed on God by faith – see God in every aspect of life
- Live God's presence: Do all for the love of God – sacred and secular
- Speak in the presence of God – short prayers
- Treasure God's presence – practise hospitality, generosity, justice, environmental stewardship, mission

When the Church was very Young – book by Ernest Loosley. It had... no buildings, no denominations, no fixed organisation, no NT, no dogmatic system...

Sharing the message – few daily situations give an opportunity for an extended monologue about our beliefs. It has to be lived.

Part 2: Dangerous promises

4. Exiled from a hyper-real world: we will be authentic

5 promises emerge from our decision:

1. We will be authentic – in a world of false celebrity and fake experience
2. We will serve a cause greater than ourselves – in a world where people are concerned about their own needs
3. We will create missional community – in a world of individuality
4. We will be generous and practise hospitality – going beyond conventional hospitality to serve the hungry/needy
5. We will work righteously – seeing our secular work as an expression of being sent by God into the host empire

Being authentic in a world of fakery is not easy. Reality TV washes over us like a tsunami, inviting us not just to watch but to participate. Signs of the real are now more important than the real itself – eg fake smells in the Tube [spray on mud?!]. we must work against the Sunday/week separation; we don't go to church to meet with God, because he lives in our hearts and imaginations. Much of the contemporary church leaves us isolated and numb; but just leaving isn't an option. As exiles we must make missional choices, take the lead in promoting authenticity, honesty and genuineness.

Many are forming new communities, with the following characteristics:

- Seeking an approach to spiritual growth which values inward transformation over external appearance
- Valuing diversity and difference over conformity and uniformity
- Enjoying honest dialogues and avoiding relationships marked by superficiality and hidden agendas
- Striving to be honest with God and with others about our struggles and failings
- Welcoming mystery and paradox over easy explanations
- Working to recalibrate our lifestyles and commitments to reflect our hope for a different society

5. The exile's esprit de corps: we will serve a cause greater than ourselves

In the 70s-80s the term 'community' was everywhere. You find it in Acts 2 – but it was short-lived. Why – because it was in conflict with Jesus' command to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. It was a community in transition; once a travelling group centred on Jesus, it had become static, and needed to again become travelling. Christian community results from the greater cause of Christian mission – it's meant to be a missionary community, not a therapeutic one. It's meant to be not so much community as *communitas* (cf anthropologist Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, study of Ndembu in Zambia). *Communitas* has both togetherness and purpose – it's community for action. People develop greater bonds during shared adventures/challenges, eg trips overseas. A shared journey offers deeper communion, a more committed society of friends who encourage one another and build one another up. Turner calls this state, liminality. The disciples had it with Jesus. It's not based on things in common – think of how it must have been for Matthew, tax collector, to travel alongside Simon, zealot – a collaborator and an archpatriot. Sports teams, dance companies experience something of *communitas*. Turner went on to apply the concept to US society, saying that prophets and artists tend to be liminal people, edgemen who are capable of propelling society forwards because they are prepared to step outside the respectability of mainstream life.

When we seek to build community without liminality, we end up with the kind of pseudo-community that pervades many churches – more like a support group than a *communitas*. Like a church demanding your allegiance and weekly attendance without giving you a cause to work towards, holding bible studies or hearing sermons for the purpose of

learning information that will rarely be utilized. It wasn't until persecution drove the first Christians out of Jerusalem that they discovered their purpose; and that threw them together into a liminal state as a missionary movement. Church without purpose – see Wild Gospel!

See Kierkegaard's goose story (in *The Shaping of Things to Come*). Some of us will stay in the institutional Church, trying to persuade the domesticated geese into the sky each winter as the wild ones fly over; exiles create new, missional communities. We have known all along that the *raison d'être* of the church is mission, and this is how we find *communitas*. 'We have known all along that the *raison d'être* of the church is mission – sharing the good news of Christ, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, working for justice. It is in the service of these goals that we will find *communitas* with our fellow workers. p 126

We tend to think if we build community, mission will follow. That's not true. It's the other way round.

Building community for its own sake is like attending a cancer support group without having cancer. It's like asking soldiers you haven't fought with to imagine that you are their father. And it's like your church demanding your allegiance and your weekly attendance without giving you a cause to work toward. It's no different to the church holding endless Bible study groups or hearing countless sermons for the purpose of learning information that will rarely be utilized. Have you ever noticed how many men attend worship only occasionally and begrudgingly, but when there's a church cleanup day, they'll turn up joyfully and work hard all day? Such workdays create a mini-communitas. So do short-term mission trips and youth mission trips. So does church planting. But weekly church services do not. It's like sitting at the apostles' feet and drinking in their teaching in Jerusalem in the first century. It serves a useful purpose, but the ultimate purpose of the Jerusalem church was to go and make disciples of all nations. There's no question that the apostles' teaching was essential, but not as an end in itself. Their teaching was meant to mobilize ordinary believers to go into the world, baptizing new disciples and teaching them all that Christ commanded them. Frost 06 p122

6. Fashioning collectives of exiles: we will create missional community

Many exiles have found their way into parachurch & missionary organisations where they experience liminality and *communitas* by serving the poor, working overseas, planting churches, regenerating urban neighbourhoods etc. Eg Shaun Tunstall – the surfing story from Australia.

Liquid church (Pete Ward) – church is a verb, not a noun...

Most of the churches being planted in SE Asia, S America, China, Africa have no buildings, seminaries, stipendiary ministers; they are nondenominational, nonstructured, nontraditional, and represent one of the fastest growing sectors of the Christian movement. Why can't we imagine being a community of Christ's followers without a building or formally trained and accredited clergy?

All we need to be a missional community is 4 things: trinitarian theology, covenantal expression, catholic orientation, missional intention. Covenantal – eg Benedict, who formed communities of 12 exiles to live together in Christ, living to a rule, with a leader. Stuart Murray (*Post-Christendom*) suggests we reimagine ourselves as a monastic missionary order. Frost's community of exiles (smallboatbigsea) lives to the mnemonic BELLS – bless, eat, listen, learn, sent.

7. Exiles at the table: we will be generous and practise hospitality

We live in a culture of obesity and excess, for which the traditional word is gluttony. How to eat? Look at Joseph, Esther, Ruth, Daniel, Jesus and Paul, as well as Jesus – whose eating habits got him into endless trouble.

Joseph – fair and wise distribution. Daniel – refusing excess. Paul – eating for others. Cf Babette's Feast. Hospitality is powerful.

8. Working for the host empire: we will work righteously

Story of an architect called Samuel Mockbee who set up firm to build (free) houses for poor people in America's deep South.

Importance of working for God in our daily lives – we all have a personal mission to the people amongst whom he places us. We have learned to separate sacred and secular – Jesus didn't. God is creator, and we are to be creative. We are to speak truth; to bring healing. Boots was founded by John and Mary Boot, methodists who sold herbal remedies at affordable prices to poor people in Nottingham (1849).

Part 3 – Dangerous criticism

9. Restless with injustice: you have been an unjust empire

The empire is complicit in injustice, oppression and environmental destruction. We donate magnificently to disasters – eg the tsunami – but continue to live as before. We have the capacity to make a difference – but we don't. The problem

is that the nature of mass movements has changed – people used to act because they believed in a cause. Now they respond in order to express how they feel about a particular situation. Protest marches and aid donations are forms of self-expression. World poverty is solvable – if the world's wealthiest nations spent just 1% of their income on the effects of global poverty, it could be greatly diminished.

Corporations are all-powerful. 51 of the top 100 economies in the world are corporations; the other 49 are entire countries. The biggest is Wal-Mart. People have done studies of the personality profile of corporations, and found them amoral, callous, deceitful. They get unfair tax breaks; don't care about the effects of privatisation, cause the greatest environmental damage – if all household items in US were recycled it would reduce our solid waste by 1-2%... They profit from unfair trade agreements and structure an inequitable global economy. Under US law corporations are classed as individuals, and can sue for restriction of their liberty to trade. We need to speak out, vote, not rely on media organisations for our information (internet better) and donate/spend wisely. Exiles cannot behave as if they belong here; but nor can we return to a sleepy middle-class Christianity that avoids the issues.

10. Exiles and the earth: you have not cared for God's creation

Whole societies have failed because of excessive exploitation of natural resources – Khmer empire in Cambodia, Vikings in Greenland, city of Tikal in Guatemala, whole state of Montana in US which logged its forests and squandered its mineral resources, and went from being one of the richest to one of the poorest states. We need to think stewardship rather than domination, and forget the idea of premillennial eschatology (it's ending anyway so why worry). From the 50s to the 90s sunlight dropped by eg 16% in UK, caused by pollution; which means the true effects of global warming are masked. We must speak and act differently.

11. Comforting the oppressed: you have not protected God's children

Millions of Christians are persecuted across the world – esp in Islamic countries. Story of family from Egypt, of boy from Sudan. We should support them. Darfur. Maluku in Indonesia. We need to develop a theology of persecution (it's biblical), pray for those involved, advocate politically, provide comfort for victims. China – some think 30,000 are coming to Christ each day, which is 10m+ each year – they have a faith hardened by persecution. The authorities paved the way for the gospel by attempting to deny the supernatural (people experienced miracles), by constructing transport systems and making Mandarin the universal language, by controlling the media and developing hunger for the printed word. Chinese leaders say they are called to martyrdom; and committed to fellowships without buildings meeting in homes. They have a plan to complete world evangelisation by spreading the gospel along the silk road back to Jerusalem, through the lands of Islam. Training includes how to suffer and die for Jesus, and how to escape from custody.

Part 4 – Dangerous Songs

12. Exiles at the altar: to God be the glory

To love another person is to help them love God – Kierkegaard

'The result of nearly 2 centuries of Christendom is that Christians have become used to the idea that their faith is primarily about attending meetings. Churchill said 'first we build our buildings, then our buildings build us' – church buildings shape the communities that meet in them; they locate the central purpose of Christian community in an act of worship. Westminster Confession – the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. What's God's chief end? Salvation of mankind...

Exercise – make 2 columns, one headed 'audience' and one headed 'church', and get people to write down the characteristics of each (the attributes of a NT church on the right hand one). Then ask them to choose which column best describes their experience of church. Usually it's the audience column... *Exiles are tired of belonging to an audience, of paying their money and expecting a decent show, decent preaching, decent music, comfortable seating. They're tired of turning up each week but knowing hardly anyone, of facing the front and watching the 'performers' do their thing. IN short, they're beyond Christendom-style, platform-driven, worship.* 290.

Alternative worship movement – see www.smallfire.org.

13. The songs of revolution: Jesus ain't my boyfriend

Much contemporary worship borrows the romantic vocab and mindset of secular teenage music – all about being in love with God. Love, for God, looked like the cross. We love God by loving others, by obeying Jesus, by lingering in his company, by speaking about him, by longing for the return of Christ, by forsaking idols, by laying down our life, by loving creation, by forgiving – it's not a feeling!

For more book summaries visit www.alisonmorgan.co.uk/Books.htm