



An arrogant or a loving eye

There is a Latin saying that in communication whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver. In other words it doesn't matter how simply, clearly and loudly I say something, if the culture and life experience of the listener have not prepared them to hear then they won't. People can only hear what makes some sense to them.

This is a rarely honoured principle in our individualistic Western culture. Our emphasis is on the speaker not the listener. We like to "come to the point", "not beat around the bush" and "to say it as it is". More collective relational Asian cultures are much more careful before they speak. They try to calculate whether the listener is open to what they have to say, whether what they say might offend or rupture relationships. When you come to think about it we westerners have a remarkable confidence in our own importance. We badly need to develop more attentive, responsive listening skills.

But communication is a two way street. It is not just the listener who cannot hear if they have not been prepared for it, we cannot see if our eyes are not open to seeing.

The values, attitudes and spirituality with which we approach mission are critical. They will determine what we can see and what we are blind to.

It is the difference between arrogant, self-important eyes and loving, compassionate eyes. The arrogant unconsciously have eyes mainly for themselves and their projects. They do not see the virtues and beauty of the other. They are overconfident in what they have to offer and ignore the Spirit already there. They can impose their own agenda onto and already existing dialogue between God and the people.

I think it was Jonathan Swift who said, "There are none so blind as those who do not want to see." The origin of the saying is most likely Biblical. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Matthew speak of those who "have eyes but see not, and ears but hear not". Sin can blind us but before we wallow in guilt once again I think the kind of blindness we are talking of is part of the human condition. It is the product of our culture, our life style, our life experience and even our religious attitudes. All of us are blind to some extent. My hope is that gradually life will convert me and reveal my blind spots.

The Japanese missiologist, Kosuke Koyama, warned Western missionaries to be careful of their "teacher complexes" and their "crusading minds" and asked them to take on a "crucified mind" one capable of sharing the life, joys and suffering of the people they live and work with. We need loving compassionate eyes not arrogant ones. It seems that the solution is to become increasingly listener-attentive. For it may be in the listener or the people we aim to serve that our own conversion and access to what the Spirit is doing is to be found.

The classic example of this in the Gospels is the story of "Dives" and the beggar Lazarus. Dives' sin was that he just didn't notice the beggar at his door. Yet God had been working powerfully in Lazarus' life and it was to be in unnoticed Lazarus that

Dives' salvation was to be found.
If only we had more loving eyes.

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