

## Costly Mission – between care and sacrifice?

In her article in the 2023 Mission Yearbook of the of the 'Evangelischen Mission Weltweit' tells Hannah Wolf the story of Zara Alvarez, a Filipino activist for human rights. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 2020 Zara was murdered at the age of 39.

Zara knew that her activism would put her into danger. As a daughter, mother, wife, sister and neighbour, she knew that this choice would have an impact on the life of others too. She saw that other activists stopped their activism or left the country, but she chose to stay. Wolf writes that this was not an easy or heroic choice, but one made in vulnerability and with fear. For Zara this was a choice of love and justice, a choice that would lead to life for all whom she loved. She never wanted to be a martyr.

To go, to act, to leave or to stay in the face of danger, how can such a choice be made? What are the questions that need to be asked, what are the things that need to be considered? These questions also need to be looked at in the context of mission, where boundaries of difference, such as cultural, ethnic, religious or social difference, and sometimes geographic distance, are crossed in order to live and share the Gospel of Christ. Zara's choice was specific to her personal context and community. This choice she made by and for herself, knowing full well the consequences for her and her community. Can such choices be made by organisations on behalf of their workers? What needs to be considered when a young family feels the call to move to Rotterdam-Zuid in order to live missionally and share their life in a neighbourhood that struggles with insecurity? And what are the questions to be raised when a young family, living as mission partners in Cali, Colombia, realises that insecurity is mounting? When they feel a deep connectedness and solidarity with the local community in Cali, but also carry responsibility for the wellbeing of their children?

In this presentation, I will reflect on the ambivalence that exists around mission, where responsible decision-making regarding one's safety and wellbeing may seem to contradict the radical call to follow Jesus. Zara's life shows that mission in contexts of danger can be costly. How should we evaluate that ambivalence? Is there a right choice? And what are the elements that need to be taken into consideration in order to come to a choice? In order to reflect on these questions, I will look at theological and biblical notions such as *Missio Dei*, incarnation and kenosis, discipleship, *Ubuntu*, and *Sangsaeng*, to help clarify what these points of consideration are. Yet, this will not lead to a single answer. At most, these notions will serve as a guide towards possible answers, that depend (heavily) on personal and contextual realities.

### Missio Dei

The first and most fundamental notion in mission is the fact that we are not speaking of a purely human endeavour, but of God's mission. This mission originates in the character of the Triune God, a character of overflowing love between God as three persons and towards the whole of creation. Creation, including human beings, are taken up into this movement. We are called to participate in this movement. This means that Christian mission does not depend on human effort or is structured along a fully human agenda. People in mission are not Messiahs. Even though they are taken up into God's active engagement in this world, they remain vulnerable and regularly failing, they remain human. The mission remains God's.

## Incarnation and kenosis

This brings us to the notion of incarnation, in which God chose to enter fully into this human vulnerability. God became human. In Jesus God became flesh. In the incarnation Jesus is not just entering into our lives and our neighbourhoods, to speak with Eugene Peterson (The Message), but becoming fully part of us and our community. Jeremy Heuslein<sup>1</sup> writes that God does not enter creation as a visitor, but becomes fully entangled in our reality. God enters our lives, with all its limitations and vulnerabilities, and so creates the possibility of true relationships. And in doing so, “God brings the fullness of life into all of creation [...] which enables creation’s ultimate joining in the life of God.” God’s self-giving love leads to resurrection and new life. Yet this life grows out of death. Resurrection follows death on the cross, which is ultimate vulnerability and solidarity. God’s love is cruciform. Understanding this notion in the context of mission and participating in God’s mission, therefore, cannot be partial or easy. It will involve ourselves completely and fully, and may involve suffering.

## Discipleship

Jesus called the disciples to follow Him. And the story of the Bible makes it clear that this following was costly. Paul writes in Philippians 2:5: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” Emptying oneself, making oneself fully available to the other, is self-giving love. And if we are to follow Jesus, this is also what is asked of us, so that together we become part of the resurrection and life in all its fullness.

## Self-giving love

Yet, it is important to give some qualifiers here. First, self-giving love is not equal to self-denial or self-negation. Rather, it is a conscious and free choice to limit or put our self-definition on hold, in order to become fully open to the other, to be able to receive the other in our life. Self-giving love creates true and deep relationships in which both flourish. Second, we need to make a distinction between self-giving as a free choice and an act of love, and self-giving that is forced upon a person by others or through a system of power or expectations. This is destructive and abusive. And third, we need to remember that understanding the call of God in the daily reality of our lives is not so easy. How do we know what God asks of us in the here and now? What does it mean to follow Christ in particular situations?

Freek Bakker, in his book *Het Verdriet van de Zending* shows clearly that sometimes missionaries made costly choices based on their understanding of the will of God. At the same time could these choices be closely related to career promotions or personal desires of fathers of a family, while at the same time they were painful for the others. The children, for example, were sent away, far from home and family, to boarding schools that turned out to be unsafe places. Bakker asks if these choices really were the call of God, or man-made. Did God really want these children to be “sacrificed” for the mission of their parents? Exploring the story of Jephthah’s sacrifice, Andrew Lane

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Heuslein, “Give us Today our Daily Bread: Towards a Phenomenological Theology of Embodied Finitude”, in *Practical Theology* 16 (2023) 3, 397-410.

wonders if the sacrifice of his daughter was really the consequence of Jephthah's desire to honour God or rather his human pride and a quest to prove himself as a true man of his word.

### Suffering and mission

In the Gospels Jesus does link suffering to discipleship and mission. The lives of the apostles also show this reality, as we can read in the book of Acts and their letters in the New Testament. Charles Ringma, in his book about mission spirituality, states that suffering an unavoidable part is of the human condition. He calls it "a dark intrusion, an inexplicable violation." Suffering is never something to be glorified and romanticised. It is complex. He writes that we cannot look at suffering in isolation. It is connected

to who God is, who we are, and the nature of goodness and evil in our world. Suffering is a theological, relational, personal, social, and spiritual experience that involves the nature of human failure and sin, the madness and brokenness of our world, the forces of spiritual evil, and the way that God has chosen to work with us – and in spite of us.<sup>2</sup>

While suffering often is painful and destructive as it is caused by human failure and sin, by evil, it can also be transformative, as for example the story of Paul and Silas in the prison in Philippi shows. In this context Ringma points to the liberation movements in Latin America: suffering was and is a consequence of the churches' choice for radical solidarity with the poor. I believe that the story of Zara Alvarez fits in this category.

Bringing the notions of *Missio Dei*, incarnation and kenosis, discipleship and suffering together in view of the cost of mission, we see that in all of them love is the foundational notion, love as God's reality in which we are invited to participate. This love is lived in love for God and for neighbour as a self-giving love that seeks to bring life in all its fullness, salvation and reconciliation offered to all and everyone in a broken and wounded world. Therefore, it cannot be good for some and harmful for others.

### Ubuntu and Sangsaeng

To translate this reality into the process of decision making in mission in today's world the (South) African notion of *Ubuntu* and the Korean notion of *Sangsaeng* are helpful.

The late Archbishop Tutu has taught the church that we cannot see ourselves as a Christian individual, alone with their God. Using the understanding of *Ubuntu* he showed that we are all interdependent: "I am because you are" and "I am because I belong." Human beings are all related and as a church we are one body, "the Body of Christ." The language of family is used, both in Scripture and in theological reflections. Christ is our brother (Rom 8:29, Hebr 2:11-12). We speak of fellow Christians in terms of "brothers and sisters" (siblings). And in such close relationships we understand ourselves as unconditionally loved and served, as well as being called to love and serve unconditionally. The idea of *Sangsaeng* is deeply relational too. It is a word in two parts, mutual or together and life.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Ringma. *In the Midst of Much-Doing: Cultivating a Missional Spirituality*. Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2023, 437.

*Sangsaeng* means mutually lifegiving. It speaks of a reciprocity in love and service, that also carries connotations of justice and mutual responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

Bringing those two concepts together, with a view on decision-making for mission in a broken and wounded world, we first realise that as family of God we cannot exist on the private islands of our own local church communities. We are members of a community, part of a family of God worldwide. This means that as one of us is joyful, there is joy for all of us. It also means that if one of us is hurting, we are all affected. We cannot say that this is not our business. We belong together and therefore also have a responsibility towards each other and each other's wellbeing. These communal relationships are mutually life-giving. Secondly, as we together as body of Christ are called to participate in God's overflowing self-giving and life-giving love, our love will extend into the whole world too, inviting, sharing and seeking justice. As community of God, caught up into the mission of God, love flows outward, the love of Christ is proclaimed and shared in a hurting world.

### Gathering the threads

This is not a message that sits easily in our (Western) individualistic and risk-averse culture. Is this again not a call that romanticises and spiritualises suffering or imposes self-negation?

What about Zara Alvarez? And the two families, in Rotterdam-Zuid and Cali?

If mission is understood in terms of being part of the family of God, connected and interdependent with our brothers and sisters worldwide, living in this world as a witness to God's self-giving love, then suffering will be part of that life. It will not only come as an unavoidable part of the human condition, but also as a consequence of radical solidarity and discipleship.

Yet, with Zara, we are never called to desire martyrdom. Our desire needs to be shaped by the call to mutually lifegiving relationships as a sign of God's overflowing love. This is a desire that needs consideration in all relationships and connections, with the people closest to us, the communities in which we live and serve, our own children and ourselves.

It will be clear that no-one can answer these questions for another person. Our lives remain deeply personal, shaped by our experiences and communities. They can never be fully understood by others. And each person has a unique place within multiple relationships and communities, which each carry specific responsibilities. This too cannot be fully known by others.

Yet, both personal experiences and responsibilities play an important role in how we live and are able to cope with challenges and dangers. As a consequence, we can help each other in decision-making, but should be very careful in making decisions for others. We can ask each other the hard questions and search together, but we also need to realise that the consequences of decisions for each person will be different, within their field of relationships and responsibilities.

Within this complex field of seeming contradictions, let us remember that God's self-giving love invites us all, gives life to all, albeit sometimes through suffering, and can never be made harmful to some of us.

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<sup>3</sup> Jooseop Kuem, "Shalom and Sangsaeng: Transforming Discipleship in a Pandemic-Stricken World" in *Mission Studies* 39 (2022) 186-202.