

Time To Grow Up

Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Connecting the Dots

GEOFF RYAN, DECEMBER 11, 2003

“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the Tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6)

“As we become more self-centred and more individualistic we enter into other cultures with greater difficulty.” (Paul Dekar)

Cause and effect – this is one of the defining differences between a child and an adult. An adult, in most cases, is able to understand that any action will have a consequence and that therefore consideration is always needed as to whether or not a particular act should be undertaken, depending on the resulting reaction, or consequence. Children inherently lack this ability to connect cause and effect, action to consequence. It is learned behaviour that needs to be taught and nurtured. It comes as result of normal growth and development, of maturing. Unfortunately there is no shortage of developmentally-stunted people around. Some have the ability to think yet seem incapable of acting, others act without giving a thought to, well... thought! And then there are those who can think well enough and can act with relative decisiveness and effectiveness, yet are never able to connect the two. And so we come to the church, specifically the evangelical church in the Western world, which seems to lack the ability to connect the dots.

It is a bit of a sport to throw darts at the church,

to point out its failing and missteps, to pillory it for shortcomings and blind spots and its besetting sins. I too have done my fair share of this and this brief article could be understood as another example of tiresome carping, so - apologies in advance. However I was given the task to write something on “thinking globally, acting locally”. Immediately the hackles of iconoclasm rose along my mind’s spine. I loathe clichés (though, like most people, am hypocritically guilty of employing them on a daily basis) and am deeply distrustful of conventional wisdom and fads du jour. My gut reaction to this assignment was that the disconnect between thought and action – actually the inability to acknowledge the symbiosis between meaningful thought and consequential action vis a vis the local scene vs the global backdrop, that this is one of the things for which the Western (evangelical) church will be called to account for when the everything is eventually totted up by God. We are guilty, I fear, of a perennial parochialism.

Historically it appears to be a consequence of our privatized and highly individualized faith practices which grew out of a reformational reaction against Catholic communalism and public religion. Over the centuries this increasing emphasis on our “personal relationship with Christ” has been responsible for an almost total eclipse of the doctrine of the church and concept of faith community within Evangelical Protestantism. Further, the seeds of a self-centred faith and a latent parochialism lie at the heart of such an extremity of reaction. This has all been burnished to a high and smooth sheen of virtual impermeability by the dominant culture of consumeristic

materialism and narcissistic self-absorption that simply is - "The West". The church usually shirks the exacting demands and high cost of being counter-culturally prophetic in order to become pale mirror-images of our cultural milieu and zeitgeist. I believe it is called "making the gospel relevant". And therefore as the culture, so the church.

The resulting disconnect between thought and action has become a wide, desert of a no-man's land in which good intentions and the requisite acts of true faith wander off and become lost, dying of thirst and heat, leaving only the bleached bones of shirked duties, aborted benevolence and orphaned selflessness.

Over twenty years ago I took a stark advertisement out of a popular magazine. It has, at various times, hung on my bedroom wall and graced the back pages of my study Bible. It is an appeal by the UN concerning a famine that was taking place in the Sudan at the time. The strap line reads: "*Refugees fleeing Sudan can't get lost. They follow the dead*", imposed over a black and white photograph of the desert littered with dehydrated and skeletal corpses of famine victims. I have kept this rather macabre and depressing image in order to constantly remind me of what the world is really like for many - if not most - people; in order to not let me off the hook simply because I am a blessed and privileged child of plenty; and as a counterbalance to the incessant battering I understood I would receive daily forcing me to focus inward, constantly and only to my own well-being, to solely my own comfort of both body and soul. Although I would not have likely understood so at the time (let alone been able to deconstruct or articulate) I also kept it as a means of connecting thought and action, concept and consequence, faith and deeds.

I knew enough, even as a teenager, that the first victim to waste away and die in that "no man's land" would be the imperative to look beyond the limited horizons of my local church and neighbourhood and grasp that the world is a large and diverse place, a generally cursed place and that as a follower of the saviour of *the World*, who was sent by a God who so loved *the world* and that as a member of a movement whose Founder's avowed aim was to somehow open his arms wide enough that they would encircle the *whole world*, I could not in good conscience seek absolution in Cain's disclaimer that he was *not* his brother's keeper. I was, in fact, and became so the minute I signed up to follow. This I understood in my bones.

And so we must connect the dots, to be true

followers of the Messiah whose canon of instruction and example was primarily conveyed in oblique and puzzling parables and rather counter-cultural, iconoclastic acts. He challenges us to examine carefully and ponder deeply his life and stated mission (Luke 4:18, 19) and to connect the dots between belief and action, between relationship with God and relationships with our neighbours, between worship and service, between the hungry and the well-fed, the housed and the homeless, the imprisoned and the free, the alien and the friend, the poor and the rich, between faith and deeds, between what we say and what we do... between our neighbourhood and the whole, huge world.

If we manage to make this connection; if we can grow up enough as people and as a people and can sufficiently mature out of ourselves...then we will understand that to think globally and act locally means things like the following:

- The next time that starving child from sub-Saharan Africa appears on our TV screen late at night, we need to think about the money we just spent on the Chinese take-out now sitting half-eaten on the coffee table in front of us. Those are the dots that need to be connected.
- It means thinking twice and maybe even more, before taking a holiday in the protected plastic-world of a plush tourist compound in a deeply troubled nation like Jamaica or Cuba, surrounded by unrest, abounding in problems, awash in poverty and need, the two worlds not even touching...unless some one connects them.
- It means understanding in any number of those interminably convoluted and incomprehensibly arcane religious-ethnic-nationalist wars that rage like brush fires throughout the globe there are thousands of people who die daily and that the arms that kill them are manufactured and sold by governments who we vote for and support and that they are accountable to no one - save their accountants - for the deals they close when it comes to selling weapons. The dots need to be connected the next time we vote...a right denied to most of the victims of those wars.
- It means that for every air-brushed nymphet who

we secretly and slyly lust after when we glimpse her on the cover of the latest men's magazine as we pay for the petrol at our local service station, there are thousands of less famous, less charmed and less pretty girls from places like Albania, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia kept chained as prisoners in darkened rooms and forced to have sex, day and night, with dozens of men. In order to make other men rich.

- It means choosing to attend and serve in a church or faith community that is more concerned

with incarnational identification with the poor and welcoming the alien than with meeting our consumer needs, affirming our lifestyle choices and keeping us firmly cosseted in the cotton-wool of our affluent comfort zones.

I could go on, but you can fill in the gaps yourself. What a thought! That by engaging in an exercise usually considered a children's activity, namely connecting the dots, we finally achieve maturity and grow up in our faith. I think it is time.