

The Revd Dr Martin Robinson is Director of Mission and Theology at Bible Society. He is a minister in the Churches of Christ, and regularly lectures on mission and contemporary culture. His latest book *Mystery and Mission* is to be published by Bible Society in 1998.



Extreme, Disturbing & Radical ?

by Martin Robinson

Most of those who are “professional Christians” (clergy, teachers of theology, workers in Christian charities and so on) tend to spend significant portions of their time with Christians. This single fact can shield us from some stark realities.

Sobering

Recently, I took part in an interview process to appoint someone to work in a local church project. The job required someone to be sympathetic to the Christian faith and to the Church even if they were not practising Christians. The job was widely advertised and a good number of candidates were interviewed. None were Christians. Each candidate was asked how they felt about the Christian ethos of the project. The answers were varied and sobering.

Some were simply arrogant without necessarily realizing it: “I have an inner strength which means that I don’t need the Church, but I have every sympathy for those who don’t have my inner strength and therefore need religion.” Most were not offensive in any overt sense, but a discussion around the question of their response to any kind of Christian ethos was revealing and, in its own way, disturbing. I have to confess that I was shocked by the degree of utter vacuousness displayed towards anything with a spiritual content.

Although I regularly write and speak around the theme of

mission in our present cultural context, I was shocked at feeling the reality of that confrontation. It is very different from knowing the theory. The shock was all the greater because, together with many other Christians, I want to assume a greater degree of spiritual goodwill than might actually be the case.

Extravagant

When we think about being missionary we often talk in terms of bridge-building, understanding, identifying areas of mutual interest, and locating points of transcendence in secular thought. We very rarely think in terms of confrontation. Yet there do come times when our response might well be more extravagant and even extreme. The boundaries between faith and doubt might sometimes be carefully and sensitively bridged and other times taken by storm.

The theme of journey and pilgrimage, which I began to explore in the last edition, and which some suggest is a way of crossing boundaries, is itself diverse. There is a huge contrast between the gentleness of Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims and the white martyrdom of the Celtic saints such as Columba and Columbanus. These missionary pilgrims railed against the laxity of existing Christian leaders, lectured kings and remonstrated against popes. They risked their lives and, in the case of Columbanus, experienced expulsion and flight. One legitimate response to the God who

calls us to share in his mission might well be to appear extreme, disturbing, radical and discomfiting.

Tension

I suspect that few Christians in the West appear to be radical or discomfiting as far as our wider society is concerned. Safe, conservative, traditional and looking to defend past values might be closer to the image we provoke. Yet it has not always been so. Even as recently as the 19th century the campaigning work of men such as Wilberforce appeared to their contemporaries as dangerously radical. Just as Columbanus had confronted the immorality of kings in their own courts, so Wilberforce pointed out the basic immorality on which the British economic success story of his time was built. Slavery, child labour, the exploitation of workers and a refusal to care for the poor were the means by which the few could enjoy wealth.

There is a potential tension between the prophetic, uncompromising nature of faith, which must take seriously the character of God and the desire to be gentle, self-effacing, bridge-building and acting without judgement. To act prophetically is not necessarily to shout across a chasm. Righteous anger is not self-righteous indignation. Indeed, we hardly dare speak at all unless it is on the basis of authentic expressions of the gospel lived out in humility, trust and dependence. It may be, therefore, that

the bridge between the prophetic and the conciliatory is crossed in the building of authentic community.

Frankly, we cannot claim to have been too successful in building authentic community. The pain of millions, revealed to some degree by the unexpected public reaction to the death of Princess Diana, is a pain with which the Church has scarcely connected. One aspect of the challenge of mission is to build communities in which the pain-filled naturally belong. When we do speak out it is not in defence of the Church, still less the gospel, but on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. And it is from this costly experience of life lived in community that we can speak with a prophetic voice. ■

The Future of Gospel & Culture

The Board of Trustees for Bible Society agreed at its meeting of 14 June 1997 to take over the work of the Gospel & Culture network as a part of *The Open Book* campaign. The appropriate legal and financial arrangements have now been completed and we hope the new journal *TransMission* will become a forum for the publication and discussion of many Gospel & Culture issues.

The Revd Dr Colin Greene commented, "It is good to see Lesslie Newbigin's vision has not dimmed, but has in fact been taken up by a number of significant institutions and mission agencies."

We hope that through *The Open Book* initiative, we can provide a new focus to this important international movement. ■