

## **Fishers of men! Luke 5:1-11**

Fishing can be a peaceful and rewarding activity, but as we see in today's reading it can be frustrating too. All day can be spent out on the boat catching nothing. At other times the catch can be outstanding. In the reading from Luke the catch was so great that extra help was needed, and then the fishing boats began to sink, putting their very lives at risk. When Jesus tells Simon, James and John that they will be fishing for people, he is using this as an analogy for evangelism, yet it is far from perfect analogy, mainly because the outcome for those fish caught in the net is not good. They will die an unpleasant death and then be eaten by the good citizens of Capernaum.

Like fishing, evangelism, and missionary work in particular, can have its upsides and downsides. Why do Christians become missionaries? Obviously, there is a vital and precious message to share, one of hope, peace, joy and love. They are essential if we are to avoid wars. Of course, we don't have a monopoly on those things, and we can respect and learn from other cultures and beliefs. Another upside of missionary work is that often other skills are shared along with the Christian message, such as school teaching, teaching new skills to adults, medical work, food and water security and agricultural help.

Missionary work can have downsides too. There are often great sacrifices made by the missionary and his or her family. There is the constant concern regarding funding and there can be very real risks to health and life from disease and violence.

A few years back I read a wonderful historical trilogy written by a German author, Jan Phillippe Sendker and set in Burma, now called Myanmar. The small town of about 3000 people that the main character lived in was called Kalaw, situated to the southeast of Mandalay in central Burma. Burma, now Myanmar, became part of the British Empire in 1887, and remained British for 60 years, until independence in 1947.

Reading that trilogy reminded me that my grandfather had lived in Burma for a couple of years. I wondered where he had lived, and if I could find out anymore about his time there. Thanks to the internet I was able to find out from a Seventh Day Adventist newsletter that he arrived in Rangoon in June 1922, as a 21 year old travelling alone from England. He had gone there to help his brother William on his farm.

Extraordinarily, William and his family lived in Kalaw at that time, the very town the trilogy was based in. Kalaw is quite elevated, above 1300 metres, (similar to Thredbo) and was popular as a British hill town, though the town was predominantly Burmese. To my surprise I found that my great uncle William was a Seventh Day Adventist missionary/teacher in Kalaw. He had been working as a missionary since 1911, very soon after the SDA church started in Burma. There were only 182 SDAs in the whole of Burma in 1922 and great uncle William's family of ten comprised quite a percentage of that number.

My grandfather moved to Australia from Burma two years later, thankfully, but William and his family stayed on. A few years later they moved to another hill town called Maymyo, 60 k east of Mandalay, which had a high school so that the children could receive a good education. Maymyo became very significant in the war years.

In 1941 WW2 was well and truly underway by then but Europe seemed far away and Burma was peaceful haven. Its population was about 17 million. 16 million were indigenous Burmese and 1 million were foreigners, including about 100,000 British. There was a Burmese independence movement led by Aung San, as the foreign presence was resented, not unreasonably. Not everyone wanted to be part of the great British Empire. My great aunt and uncle had lived in Burma for about 30 years by then, so it was very much home. Actually, great aunt Margaret had lived in Burma most of her life, and her grandmother was Burmese.

It was only when I was preparing this message that I realised just how precious this photo of William's family taken in the early 1930's would have been, and I will explain why shortly.

The Japanese entered the war on December 7, 1941. There is a shocking lack of hope, peace, love and joy in wartime. War is just the pits. The Japanese were a formidable fighting force and the Phillipines, the Dutch East Indies, HongKong, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand rapidly fell. By Christmas Eve, just two weeks after Pearl Harbour, Rangoon was repeatedly bombed and then invaded from Thailand. It quickly became apparent that Rangoon could not be held. Chaos reigned and evacuees streamed north into central Burma, any way they could. The government relocated to Maymyo in February 1942, the town where William and his family lived, along with the army, public servants and many of the refugees. There were hopes that the north of Burma could be held, but not so.

The problem was that Rangoon was Burma's only port, and apart from Thailand the only access to Burma from overseas countries was access by sea. Burma is surrounded by mountain ranges to the north, east and west, effectively trapping the refugees in a bottleneck, (or I could use the fishing net analogy again). The hope was that the population could be evacuated by plane from even further north and a temporary airfield was set up at Myitkyina, 900 k away. Maymyo, was under attack by now, and the refugees, government and army moved to Myitkyina anyway they could, burning bridges behind them to slow the Japanese advance.

Great aunt Margaret and Dad's three youngest cousins evacuated north to Myitkyina. What a traumatic decision to make! What precious items could be taken with them? Many evacuees tried to take too much luggage, and the trek out of Burma ended up littered with discarded belongings. When I mentioned that the family photo would have been a precious item, I'm thinking that it must have been carried out of Burma and would have been perhaps the only reminder of thirty years of living in Burma.

40,000 British refugees set up camp in Myitkyina and were being evacuated by the plane load, which takes time, time they didn't have. The plane taking refugees across the mountains to India was loaded with passengers and about to take off when three Japanese fighter jets shot up the plane with machine gun fire killing all on the plane, and that was the end of the hope of evacuation by air. There was no road access to Burma's neighbours India and China. There were some obscure almost impassible tracks across the mountains, and now that was the only option. The biggest known mass evacuation in history up to that point was about to take place, known as Dunkirk of the East. About 600,000 people fled Burma along the mountain passes, 500,000 Indians and 100,000 British. The sick, elderly, injured, pregnant and those with young children had to be left behind. The death rate was high, due to starvation, exhaustion and diseases, malaria again, also cholera, typhoid and dysentery. The monsoon started in mid-May, adding to the misery and the added danger of treacherous river crossings. The trek was 400 kilometres to Assam in India and took 3 months on average.

My great aunt and Dad's three cousins are registered on a database as having arrived at Naini Tan in India. They were fortunate to make it through and fortunate to be welcomed and cared for in India. They would have been emaciated on the starvation rations, traumatised, clothes turned to rags, maybe shoeless. The average weight of a female refugee from Burma was just 25 kg on arrival in India. Missionary work can certainly carry risks.

The foreigners who could not escape Burma were interned in Japanese prisoner of war camps. The Burmese independence movement led by Aung San initially welcomed and aided the Japanese invasion of Burma with their slogan of 'Asia for the Asians', and the Burmese people themselves were relatively safe, at least at first. Once the cruelty of the Japanese became apparent Aung San changed sides and helped the British Army defeat the Japanese and reclaim Burma. Part of the deal was Burmese independence, achieved in 1947.

My great aunt and uncle left India after the war and returned to England with some family members, but others emigrated to Australia. At least one son, the oldest, remained in Burma, married a Burmese woman

and rather surprisingly had a major role in post-independence Burma. I still have three second cousins in Burma.

War is the ultimate failure. How is it possible for people to treat other people so cruelly? How do we come so far from hope, peace joy and love. I think the first step is to decide that some people are not 'people like us', which is a very dangerous concept. 'People not like us' don't feel pain and grief like we do.

Propaganda is vital, sometimes with manufactured despicable acts attributed to the enemy, often without any basis. We need to avenge ourselves on these 'people not like us.' It is said that truth is the first casualty of war it is said, and that is so true. Journalists who might challenge the propaganda have to be suppressed.

A shared humanity, 'one great brotherhood of love throughout the whole wide world', is in contrast an essential part of the Christian message and we should never forget that.

Prayer for missionaries and aid workers to conclude: God of hope, peace, joy and love we thank you for all those people who work in overseas as missionaries or aid workers. We pray that they are successful in their work and that they be kept safe.