GOD'S CALLING AND THE UNIVERSITY

Vinoth Ramachandra

"God intends us to penetrate the world. Christian salt has no business to remain snugly in elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars; our place is to be rubbed into the secular community, as salt is rubbed into meat, to stop it going bad. And when society does go bad, we Christians tend to throw up our hands in pious horror and reproach the non-Christian world; but should we not rather reproach ourselves? One can hardly blame unsalted meat for going bad. It cannot do anything else. The real question to ask is: Where is the salt?"

It is nearly half a century since John Stott wrote these words of exhortation in his book, The Sermon on the Mount, but they are as relevant today as they were then, and even more poignant for Christian faculty and students in the world's universities and colleges. The tension between rationalism and faith can always be seen in sharp relief in the academic world. The temptation for Christians can be to retreat into Christian bubbles and avoid the inevitable conflict. But time-and-time again, I see that the most engaged Christian students, and the most fruitful student ministries, are those which have the courage to bring their faith to the fore and be bold in their Christian engagement and witness.

This short book from Vinoth Ramachandra draws on his 40 years of Christian witness and engagement in universities around the world to help us reflect on the changing nature and role of university and the important role of Christians in the academy. Read it and you will be inspired, encouraged and equipped in your calling to be the salt and light in the university and college communities which you are a part of.

Tim Adams*

* Tim Adams has served as the IFES General Secretary since January 2021. He has a BA in Theology from the London School of Theology and a Masters in Managing Change and Organizational Learning from Oxford Brookes University. He is married to Sophie and they live with their three school-aged children in Oxford, UK.

I like this book a lot! If you want to explore how to take seriously God's calling to serve the University well and impactfully, to understand the nature of the University in depth, and how it deeply shapes our societies today, read it. The profound and compelling analysis of the dynamics of the University today, the social, political and several other power dynamics bring a light on the challenges Christians face to engage the University. It helps to learn some of the reasons why churches and other Christian groups serving the University often fear or fail to impactfully engage the University. The book gives great encouragement and hope for an impactful engagement by pointing to Jesus's model of healthy conversations through questions leading to meaningful insights, and by providing some biblical and theological reflections on how the University today could be better served. Christians should engage the University as being a wholistic community of mutual listening and mutual learning.

This book is important, profound, and useful reading for Christian students, academics, staff, and churches who are willing to fulfil God's calling to the University well. Take it and read it. And why not study it in small groups in your community?

Daniel Bourdanne[#]

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PREFACE

When I was a university student, there was nobody to guide me as to how to live a consistently Christian life. I entered as a recent, "raw" Christian, having publicly professed faith in the risen Christ at my (Anglican) confirmation shortly before my 18th birthday. However, I had always loved learning and read widely and voraciously. I was also grateful to find a handful of Christian students who were similarly hungry, and to be exposed to some professors at our student conferences who modelled for me Christian intellectual integrity.

I learned belatedly that emotional and relational development were as important, if not more so, to Christian growth as the intellectual. But it was only when I returned to Sri Lanka after seven happy years in England that I began to understand the way even the best universities in the world permanently deformed people in some ways even as they enhanced and empowered them in other ways. Christian ministry in the various contexts of the university world has been my primary passion ever since.

This small book is an expression of the wonderful learning experience my time with IFES has been. I often tell people that my theological formation did not take place in a seminary or Bible college, but in secular universities, listening to and engaging with the

questions and issues that came up in the formal and informal conversations that make up a university.

In many countries today, campus access is restricted strictly to students and employees of the university. But even where access is unrestricted, many staff of IFES movements spend little time exploring their universities – the notice boards, the events open to general audiences, the student societies, and so on. To the extent that they do not, their teaching tends to be shallow; and the movements they serve become merely youth organizations with the university just being the backdrop to whatever they do. Such movements are not only irrelevant to the university, but the graduates who emerge are also unlikely to have been forged as life-long disciples of Christ through the mutually enriching experience of taking the calling of the university seriously.

There are two chapters in this book. The first explores, with a Christian student or scholar in mind, how God uses the university to deepen and widen our vision of Him and His world while, at the same time, calling us to a unique ministry of holistic, dialogical engagement with the university.

This is elaborated further in the second chapter, which is an exposition of the well-known story of the risen Jesus' encounter with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. I have often used this biblical text, in various contexts around the world, as a paradigm of Christian mission in the late modern world.

I am grateful to TRACI in Delhi and IFES-South Asia for their invitation to write this small book. I commend it to students, university teachers and administrators in Asia and elsewhere, with

the prayer that God will use it to transform all of us and all our universities to reflect His grace and glory.

Vinoth Ramachandra
Colombo, Sri Lanka
January 2023

GOD'S CALLING AND THE UNIVERSITY

"In view of the unique place and power of the university today I know of no more important question to ask than: What does Jesus Christ think of the university? All other questions without exception are relatively silly when this question looms in the mind… The university is a clear-cut fulcrum with which to move the world… More potently than by any other means, change the university and you change the world."[1]

These influential words were uttered by Charles Habib Malik, a former President of Lebanon, professor at the American University of Beirut, and one of the architects of the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. It is this vision that has motivated many of us to take the secular university seriously. The word *university* is a shortened version of the Latin *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, which can be translated as "community of teachers and students". The primary purpose of a university is to pursue knowledge and to pass it on to the next generation of students. Both aspects are important: if universities only pursued knowledge, they would be no different to a research institute or "think tank". If they only passed on knowledge, the teaching would quickly become stale, outdated and irrelevant to a changing world.

[1] Charles Habib Malik, *A Christian Critique of the University* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1982) pp.24, 101

The various academic disciplines of the university are best thought of as enduring social conversations and practices into which students are inducted and to which some of them may contribute if they stay long enough to do research. Christians receive these academic disciplines as gifts from God to humanity, expressions of common grace. "If we hold the Spirit of God to be the only source of truth", wrote the great Protestant Reformer John Calvin, "we will neither reject nor despise the truth, wherever it may reveal itself, lest we offend the Spirit of God."[2]

The University Today

A university education, while still accessed by a fairly small proportion of a nation's population (the US and South Korea being notable exceptions), is no longer the privilege of an affluent class. Universities and other tertiary training institutions have mushroomed all over the post-colonial world. As a result, state universities have become microcosms of the wider society, reflecting the latter's economic, ethnic, and religious diversities and tensions. All the challenges facing the nation are replicated in university life, whether it be poverty, racism, sexism, violence, or xenophobia.

In many parts of the poorer world, the massive rise of student numbers has not been matched by corresponding increases in facilities: whether student residences, academic staff, laboratory facilities, basic textbooks or even classrooms. Over-crowding is commonplace, and in many departments, learning is still reduced to memorizing the lecturers' notes. More and more students around the world are commuters, many of them working to support themselves while they study.

[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960) Book II, Ch.2.15

For the vast majority of students, including in Western universities, academic study is not undertaken out of a love for learning but as a means to employment, even sheer survival and jobs in the well-paying professions (medicine, engineering and law) are often the first choice. Given the rising costs of education, even in state-funded institutions, more and more students support themselves through part-time employment and spend little time in the university outside of compulsory lectures or lab work. In cities as far-flung as New York and Manila, globally prestigious universities exist side by side with degree-awarding tuition factories. The diversity in facilities, academic calibre and employment prospects among colleges is far greater than, say, fifty years ago.

Universities are immersed within the power relations of contemporary society. So, it is not surprising that since scientific research today is big business, prestigious universities around the world are coming to re-invent themselves as corporations, and many research scientists enjoy a new status as entrepreneurs. More funds are necessary to secure top professors, build new facilities, and finance scholarships. University administrators feel they have no choice: they have to move away from the education of students to be well-informed and critical citizens; instead, they have to concentrate more on producing people who can contribute to the world of commerce. Commercial undertakings are, in the nature of the case, in it for the money. If they fail to make money, they go out of business. Their idea of truth is purely instrumental. Knowledge is now one more commodity to be traded.

It is common for the priorities in scientific and technological research to be determined by corporate interests and, especially in the case of the US, India, China or Israel, military interests as well.

Outside of science and engineering, schools of law, business and public policy have also come to dominate much of university life. Such schools train the staff who go on to work in private corporations and for the state. Their faculty and students are profoundly shaped by the values and interests of these clients. In India today, attempts by the state to impose a Hindu nationalist agenda is fiercely resisted by scholars committed to academic freedom and the pluralistic nature of universities.

The New York Times columnist David Brooks observes that "Universities are more professional and glittering than ever, but in some ways, there is emptiness deep down. Students are taught how to do things, but many are not forced to reflect on why they should do them or what we are here for. They are given many career options, but they are on their own when it comes to developing criteria to determine which vocation would lead to the fullest life."[3]

If Charles Malik were alive today, he would probably answer his own question (What does Jesus Christ think of the university today?) by admitting that Jesus must lament over the state of many of our universities. Many are single departments, like engineering or management schools. But even those with multiple departments have fragmented into "silos", thus forfeiting the right to be recognized as "*uni*versities". The British philosopher Mary Midgely puts it humorously: 'The well-known recipe for becoming an expert on Chinese metaphysics: always talk Chinese to metaphysicians and metaphysics to the Chinese, avoid short words, and never answer questions.'[4]

[3] David Brooks, "The Big University", *New York Times*, 6 Oct 2015

[4] Mary Midgley, *Wisdom, Information & Wonder* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991) p.70

The fragmentation of academic life has, paradoxically, been promoted by globalization. The Internet was developed as a powerful tool to enable research scientists to communicate with colleagues in other parts of the world. It has also united many university departments in common research projects, and some universities have put their entire courses online for access by the general public. For those who value the public nature of knowledge, these are welcome developments. However, it could be argued that the new technologies have exacerbated the effects of the over-specialization of academic disciplines and the lack of communication between colleagues in neighbouring departments on the same university campus. Students in online chat rooms or on their mobile phones are more in touch with like-minded folk at the other end of the world than they are with students in the same corridor of their hall of residence.

Jerome Kagan, a former President of Harvard university observes:

> 'The large numbers of younger faculty competing for a professorship feel forced to specialize in narrow areas of their discipline and to publish as many papers as possible during the five to ten years before a tenure decision is made. Unfortunately, most of the facts in these reports have neither practical utility nor theoretical significance; they are tiny stones looking for a place in a cathedral. The majority of "empirical facts" in the social sciences have a half-life of about ten years… Moreover, most scientists feel no embarrassment over their lack of interest in the philosophy or history of their discipline.'[5]

[5] Jerome Kagan, *The Three Cultures; Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and the Humanities in the 21st Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) p.260

Alasdair MacIntyre, a renowned moral philosopher, reminds us that, in the great medieval universities of Europe, the curriculum was ordered to the *ends* of human beings– what we are oriented towards. The unity of intellectual activity presupposed a unity to human beings and the universe. Lacking such an over-arching narrative, secular universities have been fragmenting into ever smaller units. If we are to recover this broader vision, a university's "curriculum would have to presuppose an underlying unity to the universe and therefore an underlying unity to the enquiries of each discipline into the various aspects of the natural and the social." MacIntyre continues:

> "Over and above the questions posed in each of these distinct disciplinary enquiries– the questions of the physicist or the biologist or the historian or the economist– there would be questions about what bearing each of them has on the others and how each contributes to an overall understanding of the nature of things. Theology would be taught both for its own sake and as a key to that overall understanding."[6]

The Indian Nobel laureate Amartya Sen writes of the ancient Buddhist university of Nalanda, which is now being rebuilt in India as a potentially global university:

> "The tradition of Nalanda insisted on high educational standards, which are certainly important in India today where there is a conspicuous lack of official commitment to improving the quality of education. But it is also important now to follow the Nalanda tradition of global cooperation, a systematic attempt to learn across the

[6] Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009) p.17

> barriers of regions and countries… The school regularly arranged debates between people– teachers, students, and visitors– who held different points of view. The method of teaching included arguments between teachers and students. Indeed, as one of Nalanda's most distinguished Chinese students, Xuan Zang (602–664 AD) noted, education in Nalanda was not primarily offered through the "bestowing" of knowledge by lecturers, but through extensive debates– between students and teachers and among the students themselves– on all the subjects that were taught."[7]

He concludes with the challenge: "In our divisive world today, the need for nonbusiness and nonconfrontational encounters is extremely strong, and here Nalanda has an important vision to offer."

Our Christian Calling

So, while appreciating the different academic contexts, even within a single country, and the financial pressures that many students face today in comparison with their parents' generation, I would want to encourage Christian students to reflect on the following:

1. Remember you are, first and foremost, a Christian

This implies, negatively, that we must be alert to the way the university as an institution *shapes* us– inducting us (usually unconsciously) into beliefs, values and practices that may be profoundly contrary to the kingdom of God. For instance, in divorcing knowledge from personal responsibility; promoting intellectual snobbery and one-upmanship; exalting utility over truth, justice and beauty; being blind to the non-academic staff (often from poor economic backgrounds)

[7] Amartya Sen, "India: The Stormy Revival of an International University", *New York Review of Books*, August 13 2015, pp.69–71, at p.71

without whom the university would cease to function; being indifferent to the needs and concerns of the vast majority of humanity, and so on.

Positively, being a Christian in the university also means being open to the way Christ is at work in the university. The Bible witnesses to Jesus Christ as being no mere religious sage but the one in whom *all* created reality "holds together" (Coloss.1:17) and through whom *all* created reality came into being and will finally be redeemed (Coloss.1:18). He thus has primacy over every area of life and thought. Wherever truth, goodness and beauty are found, he is their ultimate source.

This implies that we cannot ultimately understand the nature and purpose of the world, and any of the creatures that make up the world, except in relation to the Triune God, revealed supremely in Jesus Christ. Believing this therefore commits every Christian to a comprehensive view of the world. God can speak to us through every aspect of his creation and use our university studies, and experience of university life, to help us mature in our faith. Living within the biblical narrative compels us to explore novel and unfamiliar ideas and seek how to incorporate them within the Christian vision of humanity and the world. As the apostle Paul puts it, Christians are called to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor.10:5).

For instance, the study of the natural sciences can deepen our understanding and appreciation of the doctrine of *creation* and how the latter is different from a naïve creationism that is popular in many evangelical churches influenced by some fundamentalist American groups. The study of medicine and emerging technologies such as robotics or gene editing compels us to think more deeply about what

it means to be a human *person*. The study of the arts leads us to new perspectives on the world, often unsettling and disturbing in the same way that a Gospel of a "crucified God" unsettled and disturbed the religious foundations of the ancient world. And the social sciences can help us explore the many ways human beings live out their humanness as well as the myriad forms that human sin assumes in different epochs, cultures, and institutions.

Sadly, many Christian students sacrifice these opportunities. The moment they hear something in a lecture or textbook that challenges what they have been brought up to believe, they retreat mentally and live a double life: continuing to "believe" one thing in church and the opposite in the classroom, rather than setting up an internal dialogue and striving to ascertain what may be the voice of God. This compartmentalized life is unsustainable in the long-term, not to say deeply damaging to the cause of the Gospel.

However, we need to remember, too, that developing a "Christian mind" is not primarily an intellectual exercise but, rather, the cultivation of a Christlike character. In Phil. 2:5–9 Paul challenges the disunity and rivalries prevalent in the church at Philippi (not that different to our own fragmented "Christian" fellowships) by summoning them to consider the "mind of Christ". If the incarnate Word of God is to be our model of humanness– as well as of divinity– then sitting loose to status and honour (so not being obsessed with one's academic reputation, a common trait even among Christian scholars), having a servant mentality (so thinking of my education not as my private possession to better my position in society but rather as a divine gift entrusted to me to serve those who are less privileged), and the willingness to embrace shame and humiliation in solidarity

with those relegated to the bottom of society (so being profoundly counter-cultural and upsetting our families' expectations).

Writing in the context of European universities, Nigel Bigger observes that

> "As universities have grown embarrassed about their medieval Christian heritage, and shy of assuming any spiritually or morally formative roles, they have come to train academics to be clever rather than wise, to win rather than learn, to dominate rather than contribute. Logical, analytical, literary, and rhetorical skills do not add up to good reasoning. Such technical expertise cannot protect reasoning from being driven and distorted by pride, contempt, cruelty, lust, vicious impatience, and fear."[8]

2. Learn to think well

The primary and unique role a university plays in society is to set aside people *to think and to train others to think*. There is, as we have noted above, increasing pressure in all our societies to abandon this classical ideal and to turn universities into mere tuition factories that serve the interests of commerce and government. It is why we need Christian faculty and administrators who will counter these trends and recall the university to its fundamental calling. A university may excel in a number of things unrelated to intellectual pursuits (e.g. sports), but the latter remain the *raison d'etre* of any authentic university.

Christians should encourage the role of wide-ranging conversations in the life of a university. While argument and the art of debate are important intellectual practices, in a healthy conversation

[8] Nigel Biggar, *Behaving in Public: How to do Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2011) p.75

we raise *questions* that provoke new lines of thinking. The intent is not so much to win arguments as to deepen empathy and broaden understanding. However, the ability to converse well depends crucially on *introspection*, and this requires the deliberate cultivation of solitude. This may be very difficult in over-crowded student accommodation but making the time for solitary reflection is an essential precondition for living an intellectually rich life.

Much thinking that takes place in the university today is narrow and restrictive. Even some of the most brilliant minds fail to see that different disciplines ask different questions and use different concepts when it comes to engaging with the complex reality of the human and natural worlds. Part of this tendency is to claim arrogantly that "my discipline" is superior to others; and it gives rise to bizarre exaggerations that, while providing entertaining "revelations" for the mass media, are easily refuted.

For instance, assaults on notions like "reality", "objective truth" or "free will" – while serving the useful purpose of forcing us to think more deeply of what we mean when we use such language– cannot be sustained without self-contradiction. They would also undermine the work of a university and call into question the validity of the writer's own work.

The test of reality is the resistance it offers to the otherwise unchecked course of my own thinking, desiring, and acting. Reality is what "I come up against", what takes me by surprise, the other-than-myself which pulls me up and obliges me to deal with it and adjust myself to it because it will not consent simply to adjust itself to me. As a famous American philosopher C.S. Peirce once put it: "A man cannot startle himself by jumping up with an exclamation

of 'Boo'" The point is not that our ordinary perception doesn't involve conceptualization, but that it also involves something else, something with the potential to surprise us. And, far from being a daunting puzzle, *truth* is about as basic and obvious a concept as we have. The notion of truth is much more clear to us– we have a much firmer grasp on it– than any other concept we might use to analyse or explain it.

There is more than one meaning to the question "Why?". The "Why?" of the natural sciences, looks for causes and causal chains; this should be distinguished from the "Why?" of reasoning, which looks for arguments, and the "Why?" of understanding, which looks for meanings that are at the root of our attitudes and behaviour.

Suppose we asked a physicist, "Why is the kettle boiling?", she would answer "Because the kinetic energy of the water molecules increases with temperature and at around 100 degrees Celsius a phase transition takes place to steam." There is nothing incomplete about this answer, from a scientific point of view. But somebody else will answer, "It is boiling because I am making myself a cup of tea". This is not to deny the physicist's story, but to answer in terms of human meaning and agency. Freedom has to do with giving reasons for one's actions, not describing physical events in the brain or elsewhere.[9]

Because we humans are not just objects in the world but self-conscious *subjects*, the world looks back at us with questions, and we respond by organizing and conceptualizing it in ways other than

[9] Just as the doctrine of creation must be distinguished from creationism (a religiously-motivated theory of cosmological or biological origins), so science needs to be distinguished from scientism (a worldview which seeks to reduce all knowledge to what can be described with the tools of science). If creationism abuses the Bible, scientism abuses science.

those endorsed by science. "The world as we live it is not the world as science explains it, any more than the smile of the Mona Lisa is a smear of pigments on a canvas. But this lived world is as real as the Mona Lisa's smile."[10] The practice of science presupposes that the world is an ordered, intelligible whole and that human beings, although physically insignificant and latecomers in the history of the world, have the capacity to unlock that rational order. These are presuppositions that make good sense within a Biblical understanding of creation, but very difficult to make sense of within a strictly atheist, naturalist worldview.[11]

Note that I said *think and to train others to think*. There are many senior professors who want to shun teaching, leaving that to juniors or even graduate students, while they give themselves entirely to research. A British sociologist, Les Back, has some strong words for such academics:

> "Academics should see themselves first as teachers. In my view any faculty member working in a university who doesn't like teaching or goes to every effort to minimize their contact with students should really consider doing something else. Students are our first public and often our most important audience and some of them are also our future colleagues."[12]

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[10] Roger Scruton, *The Face of God: The Gifford Lectures 2010* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) pp. 128–9

[11] See further Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods That Fail*, 2nd ed. (Oregon, US: Wipf & Stock, 2016) Chs. 2 & 6. Some philosophers have argued that rational order and physico-chemical laws are imposed on the world by the human mind. But that raises even more difficult questions, and it is not a view that most scientists share. The latter believe that they are *discovering* truths are "out there" and to which they are accountable.

[12] Les Back, *Academic Diary: Or Why Higher Education Still Matters* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2016) p.46

Some of the greatest intellectuals have seen the importance of mentoring the next generation of thinkers and exploring with them the fundamental principles of their particular discipline. You will be wonderfully blessed if you have the opportunity to sit under such a teacher: one who infects you with his or her intellectual passions, who has the courage to admit mistakes, who listens to students and encourages them to disagree, who models for students how to wrestle with a problem and how to identify the fundamental premises and current leading questions in their academic field.

So, a good teacher is not necessarily an entertaining teacher or one who helps you get good grades. "The face of the professor," writes Shirley Hershey Showalter,

> "is a place where students look to understand what it means to love a subject. In moments of exquisite attention, a correspondence between the story of the inner life of the teacher and the story of the inner life of the subject lights up the room. This can be true of a bird's nest, a rock, a work of art, a history, a holy book, a poem, or a doctor's rounds in a hospital."[13]

Towards that end she encourages teachers not only to share with students the story of the discipline itself (at least in overview) but also the professors, authors, and other mentors who have influenced this particular teacher.

Learning to think well means that your primary aim cannot be to simply pass exams. Nor does it mean only mastering analytical skills and the rules of logical inference. It often involves discerning between

[13] Shirley Hershey Showalter, "Called to Tell Our Stories: The Narrative Structure of Vocation", in David S. Cunningham (Ed.), *Vocation Across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) p.82

books and articles that we read mainly to garnish information, and books that we live in (and perhaps return to time after time) in order to follow the way a thinker approaches a problem, marshals arguments, deals with possible objections, and challenges conventional perspectives. In the humanities, this requires being comfortable with solitude and even feeling temporarily dislocated. Like an unfamiliar neighbourhood, new ideas and concepts can be initially disorienting and confusing. Finding something of great value in a text takes time and commitment. Remember that reading is what enlarges our capacity for experience: it liberates us from being restricted to our immediate circle of friends and acquaintances.

In professional fields, thinking well involves habituating oneself into certain practices that are embedded within our material and social world: an engineering student learning to combine functionality with aesthetics, a medical student learning that diagnostic ability involves empathy and social awareness as much as knowledge of the body's workings, a law student engages in the art of legal reasoning. And what should distinguish learning in a good university from a vocational training school is that students are encouraged to reflect– historically and ethically– on the modes of learning that constitute these various disciplines.

Sherry Turkle, a well-known sociologist of information technology, refers to a Columbia University study that compared online and face-to-face learning. The director of the study summed up its findings: "The most important thing that helps students succeed in an online course is interpersonal interaction and support.'"[14] And Turkle herself argues that "For all its flaws, the lecture has a lot going

[14] Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015) p.230

for it… What makes the greatest impression in a college education is learning how to think like someone else, appreciating an intellectual personality, and thinking about what it might mean to have one of your own."[15] Once again, the importance of teachers as role-models!

3. Learn to think across disciplines and cultures

In a painting by the 16th century Italian artist Raphael, called *The School of Athens*, we see the two best-known Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle in conversation. Plato holds his dialogue *Timmaeus*, which speculates on natural philosophy and a religious cosmology, while Aristotle holds his *Ethics*, which explores the role of moral virtue in bringing about the good society. Plato's hand points toward the heavens, the eternal realm of his ideal forms. By contrast, Aristotle points directly to the earth.

The professional departments (medicine, law, engineering, business) in a modern university perhaps play an Aristotelian role, attending to the concrete concerns of the earth and reminding us that the great human questions cannot remain merely "academic". The academy is situated within, and must serve the larger world. At the same time, the professional disciplines need the poets, artists, social theorists, and moral philosophers to prevent them from becoming manipulative, exploitative and dehumanizing tools within the dominant power-structures of society. It is ironic that Plato banished the poets from his ideal republic, while Aristotle advocated the arts.

Hence the importance of situating your studies within a larger horizon of thought. Very rarely are students taught the history of their area of study. Very rarely are they encouraged to identify the limitations of their area of study, and to learn from those in other

[15] Ibid.p.236

departments. The over-specialization of subject matter has led to a curtailment of imagination and the inability to make judicious assessments of public truth-claims. The different academic disciplines need each other, and the reduction of universities to "monoversities" leads to a society diminished in many ways.

An American essayist and literary critic, William Dereseiwicz, bemoans the dysfunctional nature of many elite universities in his country:

> "When students get to college, they hear a couple of speeches telling them to ask the big questions, and when they graduate, they hear a couple more speeches telling them to ask the big questions. And in between, they spend four years taking courses that train them to ask the little questions– specialized courses, taught by specialized professors, aimed at specialized students… They are products of a system that rarely asked them to think about something bigger than the next assignment. The system forgot to teach them, along the way to the prestige admissions and the lucrative jobs, that the most important achievements can't be measured by a letter or a number or a name. It forgot that the true purpose of education is to make minds, not careers."[16]

One of the many benefits of belonging to a Christian fellowship on campus is the opportunity afforded to interact with students who have different academic interests and come from different cultural and economic backgrounds. Some of these students may be from other countries. Make use of these opportunities: interrogate each other about what people are learning and how it shapes their Christian practice; or what "blind spots" people from other

[16] "The Disadvantages of an Elite Education", https://theamericanscholar.org/the-disadvantages-of-an-elite-education/

backgrounds see in the way we read Scripture or the way we plan to use our education.

Of course, your interaction on campus should not be limited to fellow Christians. The best way to learn about another culture or religious faith is to build deep friendships with those who practise a different way of life. It is through attentive dialogue, born of mutual respect, that we bear faithful and courageous witness to the Gospel even as we are ourselves open to being challenged to a deeper understanding of that Gospel and all that it entails. A good paradigm for such open witness is given in the encounter between the apostle Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius (cf. Acts 10 & 11).

This kind of dialogue runs counter to what is increasingly the case in our physical and virtual worlds. We rarely engage with difference. We associate with those who share our cultural practices or economic circumstances. We "friend" those who are like us, who share our views, and we block, unsubscribe or non-platform those who contradict us.

Christian students can also propose to the university authorities more multi-disciplinary courses, and even organize public events on campus where scholars from a range of disciplines approach a particular topic of general interest. In this way, the Christian fellowship will publicly bear witness to their interest in all of life and thought because Jesus Christ is the Lord of all life and thought.

The more you explore the history of your chosen academic discipline, the more you will discover how much Christians have contributed to the founding or development of that discipline.

Most of the early Protestant missionaries in Asia lacked a university training, but their desire to communicate Christ across cultures

developed in them scholarly instincts and habits. Some of them were responsible for developing new disciplines and fields of study in Western universities, such as linguistics and social anthropology. Andrew Walls has pointed out that when Robert Morrison was appointed a missionary to China in 1807, the entire Chinese resources of British academic libraries consisted of one manuscript in the British Museum and one in the Royal Society, and not a person in Britain read or spoke Chinese. From the London Missionary Society alone came four professors in Chinese for British universities, only one of whom had received a university education himself.[17]

More recently, Franklin Littell, a Methodist minister who served in Europe for ten years as a religious advisor in the US military command after the Second World War was the first American scholar to offer courses on Holocaust and Genocide Studies, and at Temple University he established the nation's first doctoral program on Holocaust studies in 1976.[18]

4. Learn to think Christianly

As you cultivate the habit of regular, systematic, and prayerful study of Scripture, individually and together with other Christian students, you will gradually learn to see the world (including your studies) through the lens of Scripture– the grand narrative themes of creation, sin, and God's redemptive purposes beginning with the calling of Abraham and climaxing in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ with its eschatological promise of a world-transfiguring *shalom*.

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[17] Andrew Walls, "The Nineteenth-Century Missionary as Scholar" in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis and Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996)

[18] http://www.ccjr.us/news/in-memoriam/553-franklin-littell

But thinking Christianly involves more than Bible study. Join a local church whose liturgy and preaching nourish your mind and heart. Bob Trube, an experienced staff worker with the American Intervarsity Christian Fellowship reminds his Christian students that involvement with a diverse worshiping community beyond the university can remind us of the relevance of our faith beyond our own contexts. "At the same time", he writes,

> "via physical communities in one's own university, virtual communities online, and the written works of others wrestling with questions similar to ours, we sharpen our insights and strengthen our resolves to live faithfully in our own contexts. The 'Inklings' with which C. S. Lewis, Tolkien and others gathered to read and critique work is an outstanding example of this (which also included friends who didn't share their beliefs). In another context, William Wilberforce's efforts to abolish slavery were greatly enhanced by a community of religious leaders, businessmen and scholars committed to working out the implications of Christian faith for the benefit of British society and the glory of God."[19]

In the medieval European universities, Christian theology was an integrating and overarching discipline; and a theological training presupposed familiarity with general history, mathematics, logic, philosophy and natural science. One had to learn to read widely as well as deeply in order to think theologically.

While modern pressures, social and academic, may make such integrative learning all but impossible, there are things we *can* do at university to orient ourselves on this *lifelong journey* of learning to think Christianly. So often student fellowships seem to be imitating

[19] Bob Trube, http://rtrube54.wordpress.com/2014/04/01/bringing-discipleship-and-scholarship-together-part-two/

local church youth groups in their programs– hours spent singing and discussing "church issues". They should, instead, be inviting scholars from the wider church to teach them what the Christian tradition down the centuries has had to say on issues such as science, literature, law, political philosophy, economics, and so on. Christian thinking today does not begin in a vacuum. It builds on the rich intellectual heritage that we receive with gratitude. In this way we become inducted into an alternative way of seeing and living.

Let me start with basics. The concept of God is intrinsically universal. God is not another being in the world that we can observe or use to explain other objects in a chain of causality. Strictly speaking, God does not *exist*; for every existing being is dependent on another and God, by definition, is not dependent on anything beyond God's self. God's relationship with the creation is thus radically unlike any relationship between creatures.[20] He is the ground of all being, meaning, and truth. Therefore, all claims for truth in some way or other have their basis in God. And it is not surprising that when a culture or an academic discipline loses its fundamental orientation to God, its belief in universal, objective truths becomes tenuous.

It's also important to remember that all human reasoning takes place within the context of some *tradition* of thinking rooted in a community. This is as true of modern physics and liberal economics as it is of Theravada Buddhism or Protestant Christianity. A living tradition "is an historically extended, socially embodied argument".[21]

[20] Classically, Christian thinkers have used the term "apophatic theology" to express this. Since God is beyond thought and language, everything we think and say of God has to be qualified by negation (e.g. "God is love, but his love is not…") and imperfect analogies (God as king, shepherd, mother, rock, etc)

[21] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985) p.222

Living traditions, and the forms of reasoning embedded in them, extend a not-yet-complete story into the future.

Existence has a story shape. The most adequate rendering of the world in words is by storytelling. All peoples and cultures tell stories about the world and their place within that story. And the moment something or some event is in the story it acquires a meaning, it is somehow significant. And, not surprisingly, the Biblical revelation comes to us in the form of story. Revealed (Biblical) truth is not *primarily* propositional: it concerns the proper relationship of humanity, creation and God, a relationship which is promised as the future fulfilment of the whole of reality before God. And Christ, in Christian understanding, *is* this Truth, this relationship, in incarnate and anticipatory form. As this truth is proclaimed and performed, the liberation of all things in the kingdom of God is anticipated.

This makes revealed truth a funny kind of universal. It is a universal horizon of hope which may only be verified eschatologically– i.e. it provides its own means of verification when it comes into full existence. If the eschaton never comes, the truth of the Christian story is proved untrue, and the meaning which everything held in this light is similarly falsified. But the power of that future fulfilment has reached in to the world in a way that enables anticipatory knowledge of and communication and action toward it. It is only the future that will fully and finally reveal the Truth, and it is only in the horizon of that future that the meaning and truth of all things will be known.

What this means, then, is that we Christians should not need atheist postmodernists to tell us that we do not know it all. We do not face the world with the arrogant assertion that "we possess absolute Truth". It is God who is absolute Truth and God possesses us,

not the other way around. We should not need anyone to tell us that all human thought is partial, distorted, and sometimes deployed in the interest of this or that personal or political agenda. We can be grateful for those postmodern voices that have reminded us of these truths, but we believe them because our own theological tradition says so.

Learning to think as Christians will involve asking probing questions about the fundamental assumptions and models that lie behind any academic discipline. "Any serious social science or theory of social change must be founded on some concept of human nature", observes the eminent linguistic philosopher and political activist Noam Chomsky. "There is always some conception of human nature, implicit or explicit, underlying a doctrine of social order or social change."[22] Another philosopher, the Christian Nicholas Wolterstorff urges students to "not just look at the problems a philosopher discusses and the answers he gives to those problems. Dig down to his underlying way of thinking, its assumptions, and motivations. Why is he asking these questions? Why is he asking them this way? Why does he think them important? Why does he give the answers he does?"[23]

Finally, thinking Christianly is the opposite of flinging Bible verses at people or artificially trying to mention God or Jesus in every classroom conversation. The American novelist Madeleine L'Engle once told a student who wished to become a "Christian writer" that "if she is truly and deeply a Christian, what she writes is

[22] Noam Chomsky, *Language and Responsibility* (Sussex, UK: Harvester Press, 1977) p.70

[23] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "A Life in Philosophy", *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (November 2007), pp. 93–106, at p.103

going to be Christian, whether she mentions Jesus or not. And if she is not, in the most profound sense, Christian, then what she writes is not going to be Christian, no matter how many times she invokes the name of the Lord."[24]

To be, "in the most profound sense, Christian" is God's call to us *through* the university.

Some Unfinished Remarks

The Polish-British mathematician Jacob Bronowski (1908–1974) once noted that

> "By the worldly standards of public life, all scholars in their work are of course oddly virtuous. They do not make wild claims, they do not cheat, they do not try to persuade at any cost, they appeal neither to prejudice nor to authority, they are often frank about their ignorance, they do not confuse what is being argued with race, politics, sex or age, they listen patiently to the young and to the old who both know everything. These are the general virtues of scholarship, and they are peculiarly the virtues of science."[25]

If only we could say the same of our churches and theological institutions!

We live in an incredibly complex, wonder-filled world that is constantly surprising us and challenging our taken-for-granted assumptions in every field of human learning. Even in the natural and applied sciences, much of what we are taught at university will be

[24] Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Wheaton, Ill: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1980) pp.121–2

[25] Cited in Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008) p.75

out of date within a decade. Not only is there more to reality than what meets the eye,[26] but there are profound philosophical mysteries such as, for instance, how our minds/souls connect with our brains/bodies, that may well elude our limited human comprehension forever. This is why the truly great intellects have always been the first to admit their ignorance. How childish, then, for a graduate to boast about his or her first-class degree! Learning does not cease at graduation but is something that should continue throughout our entire lives, and the most a university education can do is help us develop curious minds and provide us with some intellectual tools with which we can go on exploring, questioning and refining our questions.

Let me close these reflections with a warning from a medieval devotional classic, *The Imitation of Christ*:

> "At the Day of Judgment, we shall not be asked what we have read, but what we have done; not how eloquently we have spoken, but how holily we have lived. Tell me, where are now all those Masters and Doctors whom you knew so well in their lifetime in the full flower of their learning? Other men now sit in their seats, and they are hardly ever called to mind. In their lifetime they seemed of great account, but now no one speaks of them."[27]

[26] Our eyes receive less that one per cent of the electromagnetic spectrum, and our ears are insensitive to sound waves below 20 Hertz and above 20 Kilohertz. Also the matter that physics and chemistry understands comprises only 4 per cent of the "stuff" in our observable universe. The rest is made of what physicists call "dark matter" and "dark energy" which are still beyond scientific detection, let alone understanding.

[27] Thomas á Kempis, "On the Teaching of Truth", *The Imitation of Christ*, Eng.Trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin, 1952)

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LUKE 24:13–35
UNIVERSITY MISSION IN THE WAY OF JESUS

Luke 24:13–35

"That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" And he said to them, "What things?" And then they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the

women had said, but him they did not see." And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, but they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread."

Preamble

The risen Christ first revealed himself to a woman, Mary Magdalene, who was also commissioned to announce the good news of his resurrection to the rest of the apostolic community. Considering that a woman's eye-witness testimony was discounted in Jewish courts of law, and that the particular woman concerned had a low social status, this makes it very unlikely that the resurrection narratives were fabrications of the Jerusalem church. But it is also typical of the subversive, "upside-down" nature of the Gospel itself: a crucified Saviour, God's power revealed in weakness, God's reign expressed through

suffering servanthood, the outcastes uplifted and the mighty humbled. This was indeed "a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks." (1 Cor.1:27)

Before his death, Jesus promised his disciples "the Spirit of truth" who would "bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning." (John 15:26, 27). The post-apostolic Church is built on the witness of the apostles to the crucified and risen Christ, the Lord of all creation. Our witness, in other words, is secondary; theirs is the *primary* witness. We bear witness not to ourselves and our religious experiences, but to the Christ whose story is told in the fourfold Gospel narratives, foreshadowed in the Old Testament, and expounded in the rest of the New Testament.

Nevertheless, our own characters and stories are important. They are what give credibility to our spoken testimony. In a law-court, a witness who has a reputation for dishonesty, exaggeration, self-seeking or inconsistency is hardly likely to be believed by judge or jury. This is why the New Testament language of "witness" to describe the Church's relation to the Good News of the Kingdom of God is profoundly challenging. It draws attention to the inseparability of word and life, speech and deed. What we *say* to the world must come out of what we *are* and be embodied in all that we *do*.

The Companions on the Journey

On the first Easter evening two disciples of Jesus are on a journey. They are leaving Jerusalem and walking towards their home village of Emmaus, 7 miles downhill. Their state of mind is summed up by the poignant words they utter to the stranger who meets them on the road – "we had hoped". These are words of disillusionment, of

a sheer loss of hope. This is a couple who are grieving because all their dreams have been shattered. Jerusalem holds bad memories for them. They had left everything to follow this man, believing that he was the Messiah, Israel's longed-for Warrior Deliverer. But he proved a failure, even an imposter. Instead of driving out the Romans and establishing the kingdom of David in Jerusalem, he is crucified by the Roman state. Their wounds are so deep that they cry out for expression and cannot be suppressed.

Our world is full of people with the words "we had hoped" on their lips. Well-established liberal democracies see freedoms and tolerance being undermined by populist movements on the extreme right and extreme left. There are those called postmodernists who are disenchanted with reason, with science, even with economic progress. Many people living in affluent societies are deeply unhappy. They don't see any meaning or purpose to their lives. You only need to read the novels, listen to the music and watch the movies that come out of the West to sense this despair. But it's not only secular postmodern youth who are disillusioned, but many Christians too. My late wife, Karin, and I often met young people who have made a profession of faith when they were in school or university but have quickly lost that faith because the Christian life has not turned out the way they expected. Karin was a counsellor and she used to tell me that very often the emotional pain of the Christians whom she counselled could be traced to some strange ideas about God that they picked up in their Christian family or their church. They thought of God as either a vindictive tyrant, punishing them for every little sin or error they made, or else as a kind of Santa Claus who exists to answer their prayers and make their lives free from

illness, failure and hardship. When this God doesn't answer their prayers, their faith shattered.

There are also many sensitive people who are "turned off" by what they see of popular evangelical Christianity, especially the shallowness and social conformity. They perceive a mismatch between the message and the inauthentic lives of the messengers. Pastors who preach grace practice legalism; Christian politicians promote intolerance and chauvinist attitudes.

The Conversation on the Journey

The grieving disciples are accosted by a stranger on the road. He simply joins the conversation that they are having with each other. This is so typical of Jesus. If you read the Gospels, Jesus is always intruding into other people's conversations: conversations which he himself has not started and to which he hasn't been invited. And he asks questions more often than he gives people answers.

When he asks them, "What are you discussing?" they stand still. They are not only grieving, but astounded by their new companion's ignorance. This stranger didn't have the faintest idea of what has happened recently in Jerusalem. "Are you the only one living in Jerusalem who does not know the things that happened there in these days"? (v.18) Notice the irony: they assume they know and their companion does not. That assumption is about to be turned upside down. But the irony deepens. They go on to narrate the events to do with Jesus of Nazareth exactly as how Luke has recorded them for us. They give an accurate account of the life of Jesus. They have all the information at their fingertips, but they lack understanding. And so the question arises, "How can people have all the right information about Jesus and yet not see the significance of Jesus?" That's

the crucial hermeneutical question which this passage raises: *How do we move from mere information to understanding and spiritual discernment?*

Jesus joins conversations which others have started in order to raise questions from within those conversations and takes them in a new direction. This approach is very different from the model of "evangelism" that we are accustomed to. Students like to organize an "evangelistic meeting" on their campuses to which they invite their non-Christian friends– if they have any!– to come, sit and listen. The speaker gives answers to the questions that they want the non-Christians to be asking. (Typically, "Is God an illusion?", "Why did Jesus die?", "What is the evidence for the resurrection?"). But the vast majority are not asking such questions.

Well, what *are* the questions that most students in your university are asking? Perhaps all that some are asking is, "Am I going to lose my job because of the economic recession?" Perhaps the wealthy ones are asking, "Where should we go for our foreign holiday this year?" or "Which restaurant should we go tonight?" Now, why are topics such as shopping, eating and employment not things that have to do with God? Surely if God is involved in all of life, then any topic can be a bridge to God. If you really probe any topic, asking searching questions, you get down to the deep "religious" questions of life, don't you?

A university is a place where conversations of many kinds are taking place, whether in the classrooms, the research labs, the tutorials, the Senior Common Room (Faculty Club), the Student Union or the host of student societies that sprout on campus. That is where Christians should be, humbly yet boldly joining those conversations

(which, for the most part, they have not initiated) and taking them in a different direction. I believe it is possible to start with any subject, from the most ridiculous to the sublime, and if we ask sufficiently probing questions we descend to the bedrock issues that the Gospel addresses.

Take, for example, so-called dirty jokes. What is the typical Christian response when someone makes a joke about sex, or urinating, defecating, and so on? Either we avoid such people, or we laugh and then we feel shame because as Christians we have been told we shouldn't. But why don't we just laugh because it *is* funny and then ask those who tell such jokes a simple question: "*Why* do we find those stories funny?" After all, sexual intercourse, urinating, flatulence and all that – these are animal functions; and we're animals, aren't we? They are the biological side of us. And yet we seem to be the only animals around on planet Earth who laugh at our animal nature. I can take my clothes off, look at my body, and laugh. Isn't that a clue that we are more than just biology or physiology, that there is a transcendent, or spiritual, dimension to human life? We are part of the animal kingdom and yet in our humour we reveal that we know tacitly that we are more than just animals. Human bodies, and sex among humans, carry meanings which transcend the merely biological realm.

Now, we are called to raise such questions in the university world. That is our mission in IFES. We don't face the university with neat, easy answers or religious formulas; nor are we there to answer questions that nobody is raising. Rather, we follow the risen Jesus who leads us out there into the Student Union, the Buddhist Society or the Environmental society in order to listen to what people are actually talking about. Do you know what conversations are engaging the

non-Christians in your campus? What are the issues and concerns on their hearts? What are their anxieties, desires and fears? When you listen you also become part of those conversations. The reason we often hesitate to do this is fear. It is dangerous. We are forced to think "outside the box" in which we have been brought up. Also, we are not in control, unlike when we organize an evangelistic Bible study or an Alpha course where we set the agenda and the Christians outnumber the visitors.

Mission in the way of Jesus reverses all that. We need to be out there, maybe the only Christian in a secular, Muslim or Buddhist gathering, seriously listening to what they are talking about and taking an interest in the questions that they are raising. And then we learn to raise questions from within those conversations, trusting God to take those conversations in a direction that reflects the concerns of his kingdom. That's what Jesus wants to do with us.

The same thing should be happening in our classrooms. Say you are a science student. Ask questions within your academic discipline such as: How is science possible? What kind of world is this that lends itself to rational enquiry? Or, if you are a law student, you should raise questions such as: Is law purely a human social construction? Or are we, in making laws, also responding in some way to a law that is not of our making, a moral order that underlies all things? And where do we get the concept of human rights? If we exist simply by accident – if the only story we tell of human beings is that we are accidental by-products of an impersonal universe– then on what grounds can we say that a Downs Syndrome child is equal in value, and thus has the same rights, as an Einstein or a Beethoven? As you learn to raise fundamental questions as a Christian within your profession or academic field of study, you also respond to the

questions that people will fire back at you. "Well, if you have such a high view of humanness– you believe that every human being is made in the image of God and that's why they have certain intrinsic rights– then why are you and other Christians not involved in promoting and defending human rights?"

Now I think that's the reason we are scared to get involved. For then we realize that we are not practicing the things we say we believe. And it's our non-Christian friends who will help us to see that. But the way that we bear witness to Christ is by working alongside people of other faiths. In areas of mutual interest and concern – whether protecting the natural environment or speaking up for the vulnerable members of society– it is as we work with people of other faiths that we find ample opportunities to raise probing questions. And then we must be prepared to answer the questions they throw at us.

Even if our efforts do not bring people to faith-commitment to Christ, they still witness to God's intention to "gather up" all human activities, whether in the sciences, business, government and the arts, into Christ (cf. Col.1:20). We do not "take Christ" into the university; it is he who goes ahead of us and leads us there. He is present, even though unacknowledged, in the biochemistry laboratory, the music class, the radio astronomy centre, the Student Union debates about global warming or student funding, and all the conversations that make up university life. We are called to discern his presence and activity and articulate it with courage and wisdom.

Moreover, whether or not the conversations leads people to faith in Christ, we are still called to make a Christian contribution to the conversations that make up the life of the secular university.

Interrupting the Journey

Let's return to our text. Jesus not only joins their conversation on the road and opens a space for theme to share their feelings of bereavement, but he now openly confronts them. "How foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! (v.25)." What they needed was not just therapy but conversion. The reason they are in a state of despair is because their hopes were built on a wrong view of the Messiah. They were selective to their approach to the Scriptures. They only picked out those triumphalistic texts that spoke of the victory of the Messiah over the enemies of Israel and they avoided other texts that spoke of God's suffering love over his wayward people and his intention to heal and reconcile not only them but all the nations. They even had the women's testimony that the tomb was empty, but they could not perceive the significance of this because their "eyes were closed"– they needed new theological spectacles.

Now I find it intriguing that Jesus doesn't say to them openly, "Look, I am your Master. I have come back from the dead. The cross was not the end of the story." Why doesn't he say that outright? Why the need for a Bible study with them on the road? I suggest that it is because Jesus himself needs a *context* in which to be understood. And that context is the Hebrew Bible or what Christians later came to call the Old Testament. Jesus seems to be implying that unless we read the Old Testament, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets" (v. 27) we will not understand him, we cannot make sense of his life and his death. For this was where he drew his sense of identity and mission.

But where in the Old Testament does it say that "the Christ had to suffer and enter his glory" (v.26)? Is there any text that states this unambiguously? There isn't a single verse in the entire Old Testament, that says explicitly that the Christ, the Messiah, should suffer and enter his glory. So where is Jesus getting this from? It's obvious that the way Jesus read the Scriptures of his day is very different to the way that most of us do. Jesus did not read it as a collection of isolated verses or "proof-texts". His knowledge of God and of his own vocation was built on the whole "story-line" of Scripture.

This is seen, for instance, in the way he responded to the tempter in the Judaean wilderness at the very outset of his public ministry. He quoted three times from the book of Deuteronomy which was Israel's missionary charter. Israel was called to live as God's Son in the land, revealing through its obedience to the Torah what God was truly like; and so attracting the surrounding nations to the worship of the true God. But we know from the subsequent tragic story that Israel refused to live as God's Son and so be a light to the nations. Israel wanted to be like other nations and so failed in its mission to be a light to the nations. Jesus clearly sees himself as the true Israel, who will show disobedient Israel what it means to be God's Son. He will bear the rejection of Israel's God and the judgment that sin calls forth, and thus bring about the redemption of Israel and the nations.

We need, like Jesus, to live in the biblical story and read our contemporary world and our lives *through* that story. That is the purpose of Bible study. I would encourage you to get into the habit of reading the whole Bible, if not once a year at least once every 2–3 years. Verses are to be read in the context of the whole book in which they appear; and every book has to be read in the context of the whole story of Scripture.

When the two disciples on the Emmaus road later looked back on this experience, they exclaimed, "Did not our hearts burn within us when he opened the Scriptures to us (v.32)?" And yet their eyes remain closed. However deeply their hearts are moved, their eyes are still not opened. You can have a Bible study with Jesus and yet not recognize him. So we return to that important question, "what *more* needs to happen before spiritual discernment dawns? What is the hermeneutical key that unlocks the Scriptures for us so that we see Jesus?"

The End of the Journey

As they approach the village of Emmaus, Jesus walks ahead (v.28). He butted into their conversation but now he leaves them. He's not going to force them to faith. We read that "they *urged* him" (it is a very strong verb in Greek), to come home and spend the night with them. He accepts the invitation. And it's over the evening meal that "their eyes were opened" and they recognized the risen Jesus (v.31).

Why is it that their eyes are opened *now*? I want to suggest that it's because the breaking of bread is a particular kind of action, sharing the basic necessities of life; and Jesus is identified not only by his teaching, but by his actions and particularly his action of sharing bread with outsiders. One of the characteristic marks of Jesus' ministry was having meals with people whom others (especially the religious leaders) never invited to their homes: tax collectors, lepers, disreputable women, the outcasts and marginalized. In our Asian societies, indeed in most traditional societies, we never eat meals alone, do we? Meals are social events. We eat meals with people who are like us, people whom we identify with, our kith and kin. When we share a meal with somebody, we are also saying, "we belong together". It

is an expression of social solidarity. We know from the Gospel narratives that Jesus' habit of dining with people who are shunned as unclean "sinners" by the religious establishment deeply angered the latter. But it was Jesus' way of demonstrating, acting out the Good News of *grace*– this is what the Kingdom of God is all about. This is what God is like– welcoming and embracing the outcast, the outsider, the 'lost".

So who are the people whom you eat meals with on campus? Only your fellow Christians? Those who came from the same school or economic background to yours? What about those lonely international students– do you know any of them? Do you ever invite them to your home for dinner? And what about the student who is known to be a cheat, or a playboy or a substance abuser? Would you be seen having lunch with him?

Observe how these unknown disciples do for this stranger, this outsider, what Jesus has been doing for them over three years. *They are imitating the action of Jesus* in compelling him to come home with them. It is at that point that the scales fall from their eyes and recognition dawns. Perhaps what Luke is telling us here, in the way he has narrated the story, that to those people who are willing to obey Jesus– in breaking bread with outsiders, with strangers, with the marginalized– to such people Jesus' way of reading Scripture makes sense and they begin to see in the Scriptures what Jesus himself saw. Here, then, is the answer to the hermeneutical question. The key to understanding the Scripture is *obedience*, simply imitating Jesus, walking in the way of Jesus. It is not mere Bible reading, or collecting theological degrees, that leads to spiritual discernment and understanding, but practicing the lifestyle of Jesus.

The Desert Fathers were Christian who, from the third century onwards, went out to the Syrian and Egyptian desert to seek God more deeply. Many Christians would go after these fathers to seek guidance as to how to live within a pagan society. The story is told of some brothers who went to see Abba Felix, one of the Desert Fathers. They begged him for a word of advice. "But the old man kept silence. After they had asked for a long time he said to them, 'You wish to hear a word?' They said, 'Yes, Abba'. Then the old man said to them, 'There are no more words nowadays. When the brothers used to consult the old men and when they did what was said to them, God showed them how to speak. But now, since they ask without doing that which they hear, God has withdrawn the grace of the word from the old men and they do not find anything to say, since there are no longer any who carry their words out.' Hearing this, the brothers groaned, saying, 'Pray for us, Abba.'"[1]

When did you last hear a pastor or Bible teacher tell you, "I have nothing more to teach you because unless you obey what you heard last Sunday I have nothing more to say"? It's as we practice the little that we do know, walking in the way of Jesus in our campuses and neighborhoods, that more understanding comes. That is discipleship.

So we come to the final scene. The couple forget their hunger and tiredness, they leave their meal unfinished and walk back seven miles uphill to tell their brethren what they have experienced. That's how it is even today. All those who come to see the Lord now begin to see the world and their lives differently. Their values and ambitions change. They now have a passionate sense of missionary responsibility.

[1] Benedicta Ward, trans. *The Desert Christian* (New York: Macmillan, 1975) p.242

Conclusions

I have suggested that this well-known story gives a different paradigm of mission for our postcolonial, late modern world. What kind of graduates would we like to see emerging from our various IFES movements? The health of our ministry will be evaluated by the kind of graduates we "produce".

I would like to propose, on the basis of our study, four kinds of graduates that we should we aiming to "produce" for the church and the world.

1. Those who are able to meet hurting and hopeless people *where they are* and accompany them on their journey, while pointing them towards the living Christ.
2. Those who are able to join the public conversations that are going on in society– in the worlds of business, government and policymaking, science and technology, the media and the arts– and make a distinctive Christian contribution, often by raising questions that nobody else is asking. Do we have graduates like that from our movements?
3. Those– and this surely applies to all our graduates– who have learned to read the *whole Bible*, not just isolated proof-texts, and then to read their contemporary world *through* the Biblical story.
4. Those– and again this should apply to all our graduates– who have learnt while they were students to imitate Jesus in his lifestyle of hospitality and sacrificial service towards the "outsiders" and the "forgotten people" around them. They are distinguished from their peers in the way they use their possessions, their homes, their studies and their skills not to

advance up the social ladder but for the sake of those less privileged than they are.

Let me end with an exhortation from George McCloud, leader of the Iona Christian Community in Great Britain. He says, "I simply argue that the Cross be raised again at the centre of the market place as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a Cathedral between two candles, but on a Cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; on a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and Latin and in Greek; at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died and that is what He died about. And that is where Christians should be and what Christians should be about."[2]

[2] George McCloud, *Only One Way Left*, quoted in Donald E. Messer, *Contemporary Images of Christian Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) p.170 (McCloud uses "churchmen" instead of Christians; I have amended his text.)

About IFES South Asia

IFES (International Fellowship of Evangelical Students) is a network of close to 180 indigenous and autonomous 'university student ministries' from across the world committed to sharing and living out the good news of Jesus Christ.

IFES enables students and academia from diverse cultures and contexts engage with and support one another in their Christian calling to be ambassadors of God's Kingdom in their Universities whether it be in their academic disciplines of study, the world of tertiary education or the issues of their day.

IFES South Asia seeks to support the National University Ministries in the South Asia region by equipping and building capacity of the National Movements to be both relevant and resilient as they nurture students to develop a Christian mind, a dialogical and incarnational lifestyle and seek the flourishing of the churches and communities they are a part of.

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