

Christ for all Nations Mark 15:24

I want you to imagine that you have just had a work photograph or a class photograph: that is, you and all your colleagues together have your photo taken. Turn to the person beside you and answer for me this question. When you look at that group photo, whose face do you look for first?.....

I have always been a person who likes to study cultural trends and what people are thinking in order to get into their world and eventually find some way to share the gospel with them. I think that is why I am such a fan of Dave Mann the author of the Hope Booklets and the inspiration behind Alltogether.co.nz, the best website in NZ on how to share your faith with kiwis.

I have noticed from what I have read of history and what I have observed that in the 1950's the language in the west was all about doing life in general terms, in NZ or in a nation. In the 60's the language became more focused on certain people groups. In the 70's the focus became more on smaller groups of people and the identity of 'us' became the norm. In the 80's and 90's there was so much about dressing yourself for success, self-help gurus, achieving your potential type talk. In the last 20 years of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter it would seem to me that the focus is now firmly on 'me,' that is you and I individually, what we are wearing, what we are thinking, what great meals we have just made, where I am and what I am doing.

The focus has gone culturally from an international focus, to a people focus, to an us focus, to a me focus. I have always been intrigued by how various artists in various cultures draw Jesus. In Japan Jesus looks Japanese, in England pictures of Jesus look British, In America pictures of Jesus look American and in NZ I wouldn't be surprised if someone somewhere drawn Jesus wearing a hunting and fishing sweat shirt. Maybe that is good, but the reality is that our perspective of life and faith is often focused on us.

It's hard to avoid, but humanity has this habit of seeing Jesus through our own eyes and being very self-focused; on people like us and we are his favourites.

I came across this word 'Ethnocentricity' some time ago. Here is a definition of what it means.

The Greek word ethnos means "nation" or "people". So ethnocentricity shows itself in a lack of respect for other ways of life, and an ethnocentric person feels that his or her own nation or group is the cultural centre of the world.

You know there have been times when I have heard in the news or witnessed the abuse of women in other cultures, when I have seen in NZ people from other cultures act so arrogantly towards others, when I have read an Open Doors report or very occasionally read the Voice of the Martyrs about the persecuted church, my heckles go up and I feel myself judging some of these people groups, wishing they were as wise and as well informed as we are in NZ.

I recall my lowest point in my life when thinking of other people groups as not being as good as our own. It was about 10 years ago. I had a friend who was very well informed about the persecuted church and the genocide of Christians in the last 100 years around the world. This guy sent me a video clip via e-mail that to this day I wish I had never seen. It was about 2 minutes long and it was a group of young ISIS soldiers taunting Christian pre-schoolers with guns and hate speech just before they slaughtered all these kids. The bewilderment and the horror in these little eyes was just gut wrenching. If you had have handed me some button that if pushed would wipe out those ISIS soldiers at that moment, I would have pushed it. For a moment after watching that video I viewed those child taunting, butchering soldiers as vermin to be eliminated but I was aware deep down, that my Jesus, while He would want those children protected, at that moment in time, Jesus would have a very different view of those men from me.

This morning as we are blessed to have two of our three missionaries home, I want us to think about God's great love for the nations. And as a spring board into that, as we continue our study in Mark's gospel, I want us to look at just one verse.

Mark 15:24 NIV

²⁴ *And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.*

They stripped all Jesus' clothes off Him, stripped Him naked, nailed him to the cross and then gambled, played a game to see who would get to keep what.

Now I want you to do a little quiz on the screen for a few minutes so that you can get the point that I want you to see here.

What is the first thing that we notice about people that helps us identify where they are from?

Their clothing.

If a bloke is wearing a hunting and fishing sweat shirt I think, hey that guy is one of us, he's a kiwi.

We identify initially what culture, what people group a person belongs to by what they are wearing!

What was Jesus wearing on the cross when he died for the sins of the world?

He wasn't wearing black, or yellow and gold, or any culturally identifying features. When we picture His body, horrifically ripped apart and arms outstretched, who are those arms outstretched to?

Everybody.

You will be aware that the Old Testament is full of prophecies about what Messiah would do when He came to earth, all of them, over 300 of them Jesus fulfilled exactly. But those prophecies weren't given hundreds of years earlier so that when Jesus was born in Bethlehem or when He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey people would go, Oh, He is fulfilling a prophecy, He must be Jesus. No, every prophecy that Jesus fulfilled does more than confirm who He is: it teaches us something about Jesus.

Hundreds of years before Jesus died for our sins, the Psalmist prophesied how Jesus would describe one of the events surrounding His death and he wrote

Psalm 22:18 NIV

¹⁸ ***They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.***

Jesus knew that this is what would happen to His clothing at His crucifixion.

What is the significance of that? Why did God have this prophecy recorded in His Book?

I believe that Jesus, arms outstretched, devoid of any cultural markers, was declaring something about Himself. That he was dying for all people, for all nations. If He had been wearing kiwi clothing, it might have looked like we were His favourites, if He was wearing Hebrew clothing it might have looked like He was dying for the Jews. But there were no cultural markers because Jesus gave His life so that all people might be saved and have eternal life. All People's. But I thought that we were His favourites and we aren't as mean and as messed up as those guys.... All people, all nations, He loves them and died for them all.

Somewhere in the book of Romans, and Biblegateway didn't help me find it this week, it says that God is not a respecter of persons. Meaning that God loves all people equally. Now when I read of the things God has said about Job, about Abraham, about David, about the prophet Daniel and even about Mary the mother of Jesus, I would be inclined to say that actually God does have favourites.

However, let me put that in context for you.

We have all read about Father Abraham, the father of faith, and the great things he did. In fact, one day as a creative act of worship he plants a tree and says "Lord I love you, I am planting a tree as a gift to you." It almost sounds the opposite of something that I might do. Great man. And he is described in the Bible as 'a friend of God.' WOW. That sounds pretty special. To be called God's friend.

Centuries later, in the little town of Bethany, in a small house there are a few people gathered there listening to Jesus and there is another act of worship. Just days before Jesus was to be stripped and nailed to the cross, Mary takes a little box of super expensive perfume, around a year's wages worth, breaks it and pours it over Jesus' feet. And there is a disciple in the room, and this guy says, what the heck, what a waste, that could have fed the poor. That man was the disciple responsible for looking after the money and his name was Judas, which simply means Son of Perdition or if you like son of waste. Abraham plants a tree for God and says Lord this is for You. Mary pours \$60,000 worth of oil over Jesus and Judas goes, what a waste.

Abraham was called a 'friend of God' but here in the Garden of Gethsemane, as Judas comes to betray Him with a kiss and have Jesus arrested, Jesus says to Judas "Friend, what do you want with me."

Abraham is a friend of God and Judas is also called 'friend'. Wow.

Crickey, as Pete Warren would say.

Two men, opposites in my opinion. One amazing, one an egg and God calls them both 'friend.'

You see, whether you are super close to the Lord in worship and obedience or whether you are being grumpy and mean and nasty. Jesus says, I have died for your sins, I want all people to know me and be saved, your sins past, present and future are covered by what I finished on the cross. They are paid for they are gone and you are clean.

Jesus calls you friend, He accepts you, not because you are someone famous like David Jeremiah or Brian Houston or Faye Hohaia.

He loves you personally. He is not mad at you. He is not disappointed in you. He is not going to give up on you.

That is naked love. That is unconditional love. Do I fully understand it??? Not at all, but it's true. He loves you and the person next to you, and the guy on the news who blew himself up in order to kill others. He loves you and he died for all humanity, so that if someone believes, anyone believes and turns to Jesus for salvation and a new start, they will be washed clean and saved.

He loves those ISIS people, He loves the peace keepers, He loves the wise in the world and He loves Donald Trump. He loves Jacinda Ardern and Judith Collins. He loves us all and He died for all nations.

God doesn't really care whether you have one car or three. He doesn't care whether you own your own home or if you have a home plus a holiday batch. He doesn't care whether you holiday in the Mediterranean or whether you holiday in Kawakawa. What God cares about is this, that His people become infused with His heart, that they come to understand that God loves the people of all nations and that it is His will that no one miss hearing about Jesus and His unconditional love for them. That all people come to realise that Jesus is not just a Hebrew, that He is not a kiwi or a Japanese person, that He is the saviour of the world, for all people, so that none should perish.

John 3:16 NRSV

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.