

Word and Mission: an exploration of the Word in John's Gospel and contemporary mission

Revd Dr Caroline Wickens is a Methodist minister, currently on the staff of STETS (the Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme) based at Sarum College, England. She has previously worked in theological education in both Zambia and Kenya. The following reflection on the importance for mission of the Gospel of John's understanding of the Word was originally delivered at the MWM Conference in Swanwick in June 2006.

I was delighted when Val approached me about speaking at the MWM Conference. Although I've not been before, because I haven't been in the UK at this time for some years now, I had often heard about Swanwick and the exciting things that go on here. And I was very pleased to be asked to explore how our modern mission emphases are rooted in the Bible, as part of the 'reinventing the wheel' theme that guides our thinking this weekend. But the Bible's a big book! so, not wishing to keep you from your beds all night, I decided to focus on John's Gospel, which has, it seems to me, been rather neglected as a source of mission thinking. Bosch's book *Transforming Mission*, for example, has chapters on the Synoptics and Paul, but no developed discussion of John. So I thought I could do worse than follow in the footsteps of the President of the Methodist Conference¹ and reflect with you on John's Gospel, and specifically on the notion of Word which runs throughout the Gospel.

'In the beginning', we hear the familiar opening words of John's Gospel, 'in the beginning was the Word'. And this takes us – and John's Jewish readers – straight back to the very beginning, when God *said* 'Let there be light' (*Genesis 1.3*), and there was light. John sees the Word as fundamental to that self-expression of God that we call the *missio Dei*, God's mission². Without the Word, there is no mission. Unless and until God speaks, God cannot reveal Godself as missionary; not only is there no possibility of communication without the word, but there is nothing to communicate *to* until God speaks the world into life. And then the spoken world reflects God's spoken word, God's identity, as Paul reminds us in Romans 1.20:

Ever since the creation of the world, his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

But we can know God far more fully through the definitive word that took flesh and came to pitch his tent among us (*John 1.4*).

Translating the Word

I think John's use of the concept of Word is profoundly helpful in enabling us to think about what

we mean by God's mission, and how we in the church share in that mission and reflect in our many programmes the priorities of God's Word. And my first question is not, I hope, as silly as it sounds: in which language is the Word of God? I was amused to learn recently from the da Vinci Code that the Knights Templar considered English to be a sacred language, because of the languages they knew, English was the furthest removed from Latin, the language of the enemy Rome (Brown 2003:403). If that's the case, think how blessed you are if you speak kiSwahili or Tamil! But it's a serious question. You can't have a word that doesn't belong within a language-system; what we mean when we talk about 'word' is a sound that conveys meaning within a particular language.

So when John talks about Jesus as the Word, he is using a metaphor that suggests a way of being firmly rooted in particularity: words are not universal but belong in a particular context, a particular culture. This metaphor fits into a wider matrix of ideas revolving round incarnation. Jesus took our flesh; not in a generalised way, but specifically, as we are all specific to a particular place and historical context. One major development within theological thinking in the last twenty or thirty years has been the recognition of the importance of place. Earlier in the last century, Western Christians had largely lost sight of the fact that their theology was culturally conditioned; they simply assumed that it was supracultural and universally valid (Bosch 1991:448). It is by now taken for granted by most theologians that your place, your context, matters (Gutierrez 1988:xxxvi). It is no longer possible to think of yourself as occupying a value-free or neutral location; if you are a White theologian working in Oxford or Tübingen or Yale, that context conditions your approach as surely as if you are a poor Latin American peasant. Authentic theology only becomes possible when you recognise the importance of your environment in conditioning the way you think and establishing your priorities for you. It is essentially local reflection within a global network.

The same is true when we seek to express our theology by sharing in God's mission, especially if that means working cross-culturally. Each of us is moulded by where we come from; for each of us, the Word is spoken in a particular language, and the shape and grammar of that language influence us as we give voice to the Word. And that is not something to be ashamed of or to try to run away from; nor is it anything to be triumphalist about – the notion that one language is 'better' than another has long gone³. All languages have the capacity to express the word of God; this is one aspect of the missionary insight that God is alive in all cultures⁴.

Thus the Word is inevitably part of a language, otherwise it wouldn't be a word, and we need to acknowledge our linguistic and cultural rooting as both limitation and strength. Limitation: because in a world divided by language we cannot instantly communicate the word through our words – what a gift the common language of Greek was to the early church. Strength: because the power of words comes precisely through their grounding in a particular language-system, with a history and a

contemporary set of associations. Take the word 'Christian': at first a mocking nickname for a despised sect, then a name kings and emperors were proud to own, and now once again the name for a social aberration, at least in the West. All those layers of meaning give the word a depth of association and a richness of emotional overtone in a particular context that goes far beyond the simple meaning of 'someone who believes that Jesus is Christ'.

So when John talks of Jesus as the Word, he is describing a way of being that is firmly rooted in a given culture and language – that is fundamentally local. But words can also be translated. I want to suggest that John's image of the Word, translating into the culture of first-century Palestine and then on into the many cultures of the Roman Empire, gives us an image for our modern thinking about how to do cross-cultural mission, because of the potential for translation inherent in any word and the necessity of translating it correctly if we are to make our message understood.

Translation is a powerful tool, but it's also easy to get wrong. I want to illustrate this by venturing into the relatively unfamiliar territory of modern Bible translation. As I understand it, there are two basic options: either formal correspondence or dynamic equivalence⁵. If you produce a translation with formal correspondence between the two languages, you use the exact equivalent in the destination language, regardless of whether your translation makes sense to its readers. We all know the stories of Equatorial readers puzzled by phrases like 'whiter than snow'; the problems are far more intense when a language only has one word for 'spirit' and it means 'bad spirit'⁶. Dynamic equivalence looks for words and phrases that convey the underlying ideas effectively, and tends to produce a translation that is much more accessible to its hearers. I spent some time doing translation and exegesis with groups of African students of Greek. Once we were trying to work out how to convey the sense of Jesus' statement that Herod is a fox (*Luke 13.32*). The Kikuyu students had no problem with a straight translation; for them, a fox was greedy and cunning – which seems to be also what Jesus was implying. But there were also two from Sudan, for whom a fox was brave and clever. For them, Herod ended up being a vulture.

This process of achieving dynamic equivalence is more satisfactory in conveying meaning, but it's also much more challenging, requiring us to leave behind our ingrained ideas about which words are suitable to convey the meaning of the Gospel. This kind of translation of the Word puts the initiative and the control firmly in the hands of the intended audience; it demands trust and confidence on the part of the translator, and a willingness to let go and let the Spirit of God guide the process.

I guess you can see where I'm going. The process of translating the word serves as a paradigm for the whole understanding of mission as inculturation. One of the major insights of modern

missionary thinking is that we need to let go of the Gospel so that it can take root in new cultural contexts – as God spoke the Word into the world and let it echo round the planet in a thousand different languages at once. The word of God can be expressed in any language and any culture; but the process of translation, the process of inculturation, needs great care to enable the Gospel to be spoken in a new language in the right way, so that it enables new participants to find ways of speaking about God in linguistic and cultural terms that make sense to them and enable them to live the Gospel authentically within their own context. The notion of inculturation, explicit in the churches' missionary thinking since the 1980's, has been implicit in our central texts since the beginning. But the challenge is to follow John's thinking all the way. When the Word became flesh, he took on the totality of a particular kind of human being, without holding anything back from full identification. When we seek to inculturate the faith, we rarely have the confidence to do this. Whether we are seeking to support a group in Africa in inculturating into their traditional ways, or an inner-city group in developing a fresh expression of church, we tend to hold back; this is all right, but that – I don't think so. John's image of the Word made flesh is of total, unlimited inculturation.

Word and Conversation

The second area I want to reflect on is that word implies conversation. We don't simply talk into a void, unless tragically we are no longer in our right minds. If we talk to ourselves, it's as an inner dialogue in which we interrogate ourselves in quest of a solution to our problems. But more often we talk to each other, thrashing out our ideas in dialogue and seeking to help others understand where we are, and to see where they are. So it is with the Word of God. John is using a fundamentally conversational metaphor, highlighting that God relates to creation through dialogue.

I want to explore this idea by reflecting in more detail on two consecutive stories of conversations in John's Gospel. Chapter 3 recounts Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, while chapter 4 tells of his conversation with a nameless Samaritan woman. The two dialogue partners are set up in the structure of the Gospel to contrast with each other. He is an important member of society, highly respected for his position and learning. She is less than insignificant; her reputation is so bad that she has to come to draw water in the heat of the day, when the respectable women of the village are not around. If we didn't know these stories already, we would expect the conversation with him to be a success and with her to end in failure of understanding. But John's introductions to the stories give us pointers that it is going to be different: Nicodemus comes at night, during that darkness which carries such symbolic value in John's Gospel, while she comes at noon, when the light is at its brightest.

Jesus invites them both to enter a world of symbols with him; and the symbols overlap in both stories. Nicodemus is invited to reflect with Jesus on a chain of images which convey the idea of rebirth in water and the Spirit; but he falls at the first hurdle and insists on remaining at the level of literal understanding – ‘can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ (*John* 3.4) Of course not; Jesus is talking about people newly born into the Christian life, and the waters of birth become the waters of baptism. But Nicodemus cannot enter his symbolic world; for him, his birth is in itself enough to guarantee his membership of the Covenant – after all, he is a son of Abraham (Schneiders 1999:120). His part in the conversation ends with the confused words ‘how can these things be?’ The Gospel is not too hard on Nicodemus, who comes to faith through action if not through understanding (7:50 – 52, 19:39 – 42; Schneiders 1999:118); but at this point he reveals how dialogue fails when there is no willingness to enter another’s symbolic world.

Things are very different with the Samaritan woman. Jesus begins the conversation by asking for a drink, familiar ground for the woman at the well. He then moves on to introduce the idea of living water – see how the symbol shifts from the waters of birth to the water we drink, but both have the property of giving life. The woman is initially thrown by this unexpected cross-cultural contact, but recovers and continues the conversation, gradually moving towards the realisation that Jesus is talking in symbolic language and that words have meanings beyond the everyday. Her questions initially reflect the same level of doubt as Nicodemus’ – ‘are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?’ – but then she moves on to a more open response to Jesus: ‘Sir, give me this water’. She doesn’t yet understand fully what she is offered, because she thinks it will save her from a daily trip to the well, but her openness creates the conditions in which Jesus can help her move on, through a conversation about her complex marital history⁷ to the amazing moment when he reveals himself to her as Messiah. She then rushes off to tell her people what she has found, and brings them to faith in Jesus as Messiah for themselves, a first evangelist. The Samaritans are going to be part of Jesus’ community and take their full place in the new covenant⁸. And the means to achieve this is open, sensitive and developing dialogue.

In reading these two passages, it’s vital to remember that Jesus is not calling either of his dialogue partners to conversion to a new faith. Both are already members of a Yahwistic religion, and both are called to deepen their allegiance to God, now revealing Godself in a new way. It’s anachronistic to think of Jesus as calling for a conversion from Judaism to Christianity; throughout the first century, the two were gradually diverging streams of one faith. This helps us see these conversations as prototypes for our own use of dialogue in mission, which also seeks to enrich and transform existing faith. Paul Knitter puts it as follows (1996:23)

A correlational model presumes – which means it cannot prove rationally – that

conversation among members of different religious communities is *possible* and that it is at least *profitable*, if not *necessary*. This perspective believes – or trusts – that persons from totally different religious backgrounds can talk to each other and understand each other sufficiently to make the conversation worthwhile, even enriching, maybe transformative.

Knitter's model for effective dialogue fits quite closely to the patterns presented in these two stories. Fundamentally, the dialogue has to proceed 'as part of a genuine relationship of equality and respect' (:23). It is part of the wonder of the Incarnation that Jesus, the Word of God, is willing and able to speak to us as one of us, on a level playing field, respecting our views and not forcing himself on us from a dominant position. He has indeed become in all things as we are; and that equality is reflected in the two gentle dialogues here, where he presents his point of view without asserting authority or seeking to dominate, listening and responding sensitively to the views of his partners in dialogue, inviting them to enter his symbolic world and see where it takes them, but without forcing anything on them.

'Yet', Knitter continues (:24), 'in a real co-relationship of religions, participants are called on to speak their minds. For the relationship to be vibrant and productive, religious persons participating in dialogue have to be fully who they are – believers, persons who are convinced and committed to what they hold to be true and good'. We see this level of authenticity and integrity reflected in Jesus' participation in dialogue, maintaining his point of view even when quite strongly challenged (3:5) and revealing his total commitment to his mission.

It is, then, a fundamental attribute of the Word that it is a word in conversation, not isolated from the words of others; and that conversation creates the possibility of transformation. I think this dialogical aspect of his identity is fundamental to John's presentation of Jesus' mission, which culminates, after all, with the statement to his disciples 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father' (15:15). The Word is established through conversation, dialogue and sharing; Jesus does mission by talking to people he calls his friends. This is reflected in our modern focus on mission as dialogue between people of different points of view who gradually learn to call each other friends (Bosch 1991:483 – 489). The challenge here, I think, is that where Jesus is able to communicate, he is very rapidly ready to hand on responsibility to his dialogue partners for taking the message further. The Samaritan woman is an unlikely evangelist, probably ill-educated, mistrusted by her community; but Jesus' trust in her pays off and her community come to faith through her. I wonder to what extent we are capable either of enthusing our dialogue partners or of trusting them to spread the word further.

Word as creative, transformative and liberative

I want to move on now to consider the Word as creative, transformative and liberative. I have chosen to group these three aspects of the Word together because they all have to do with the gift of life to God's people.

John highlights the creative power of the Word in his prologue: 'All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life.'

The Word is not the Creator; of himself he can make nothing. But he is creative in that he plays a vital role in God's activity of creation. The Word in John participates in creation in the same way as divine Wisdom does in the OT (*Proverbs* 8.22 – 31); it is God's blueprint for creation, and it is the means by which God's plan becomes reality as God speaks, transforming the primeval chaos into ordered, meaningful creation.

This creative power is expressed in the Gospel itself in the ongoing process of life-giving transformation. Jesus shares the Father's power to give life and renew it. Think, for example, of the story of John 9, where Jesus restores sight to a blind man, 'working the works of him who sent me', as he expresses it. This story is significant not just for the miracle but also because Jesus opts to perform the healing on the Sabbath, when work such as making the mud with the saliva was forbidden by Jewish law. In doing this, Jesus identifies himself with God, whose work of creation ended on the sixth day but whose work of supporting and sustaining creation continues even on the seventh day (Thompson 2001:228). By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus is making the point very clearly to his Jewish audience that his work is an aspect of God's work and that God's power to create and sustain flow through him.

I want now to look in more detail at the story of the raising of Lazarus in John 11, a story in which the life-giving power of the Word is very apparent. Unusually for John, it is a complex scene with several people involved, and their emotions are raw on the page as Mary, Martha and Jesus himself weep for Lazarus whom they loved. Within the emotion we can read the faith; it is here that Martha, in all the emotional tension of bereavement, declares 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world'. That strong, passionate statement of belief creates the context in which Jesus will raise Lazarus from the dead. And so Jesus and his friends come to the tomb, and practical Martha emphasises that Lazarus is really, inescapably dead after four days. And then Jesus prays, focusing on the constant link of hearing between himself and the Father; and then, in a moment of great tension and hope against hope, he shouts 'Lazarus, come out!' and Lazarus does, with the grave-clothes still wrapped round him. And it is precisely the word, that shouted command, which changes death into life.

Now you might think that this story has little to do with us in Christian mission; for we do not generally wield the power to call people back from death to life. But the transformative power of God's word can renew people's lives where society has imposed deathly, death-dealing conditions. When I worked in Kenya, I did some work in the area of HIV/AIDS education, and I remember a speaker coming on one occasion who was HIV+. She had been diagnosed in the early days of the epidemic, when no-one was quite sure how the virus was transmitted. She had been at school when the news broke, and was immediately called from class, told to pack her things and go. Completely isolated from her friends, she went home, and her distraught mother shut her in a back room and left her there, waiting for her to die. And she too waited to die; but of course, the nature of HIV being what it is, she didn't. So, like Lazarus shut in his tomb, she waited. Eventually the pastor found out what had happened and came to see the mother; and eventually the mother gave him access to the girl's room, and they talked about possible futures; and eventually she came out and began to find ways of living positively, as they say. But it was the word, the conversations, which brought her back to life and created the opportunity for hope – not the life she had dreamed of, perhaps, but nevertheless a life worth living.

The transformative, life-giving power of the word of God is high on the mission agenda today. We are not development workers; indeed, the developed lifestyle of the West is a very ambivalent goal. Nor are we crisis-response agencies; though of course we do some of that where necessary. We are called to speak God's transformative word into the world and so create the conditions in which the people of God's kingdom may flourish. The story I've just told suggests that one effective way to achieve this is to enable people to find the resources within themselves and within their own environment to cope with the challenges of their environment, and this is borne out by much of the literature on this topic. The manual 'Training for Transformation', for example, writes (Hope and Timmel 1984:23):

During the last 90 years, the church has been changing from a conservative stance, in which she frequently supported the existing structures of power, towards a prophetic stance. Though there are still reactionary forces within the institution, the prophetic voice is challenging the Christian community to become deeply involved in the struggle for total liberation, which includes the economic and social, the political and cultural levels of life, and goes beyond all these.

Commenting on this transformative approach, Donal Dorr writes (Dorr 2000:234)

Fundamentally, the psycho-social method enables those who use it to engage in a type of human development and liberation which is very *participatory*. It is one which truly

respects the 'ordinary' people, by giving them a sense of their own dignity. It empowers people to take responsibility for their own lives, for the welfare of their community, for promoting justice and human rights in the wider society, and for the preservation of earth. Because it embodies these fundamental value-systems I would say that the psycho-social method is a very important 'carrier' of the Christian value-system.

Here, Dorr introduces another term which is key in this kind of missiological thinking: the notion of *liberation*. As people are empowered to hear the transformative word of God, so they find liberation from the things that oppress them. I want here to consider John's account of the Resurrection and within it, specifically the role of Mary Magdalene (ch.20). You will remember that she is the first one to come to the tomb, early in the morning while it was still dark. She finds the stone moved and immediately leaps to the conclusion that someone has stolen the Lord's body. After Peter and the beloved disciple have visited the tomb, seen the graveclothes and gone away, she remains there, weeping, and then sees the angels. She is so overcome by grief that she doesn't express terror or even surprise at their presence; and then, when she turns round and sees Jesus, she is not able to recognise him – until he speaks her name. And that word, Mary, is a word of liberation at many levels. She is set free from her grief and anxiety about the future; she is set free from her blindness about who Jesus really is; and, importantly, at a structural level she is set free from her status as a woman within a society that dictated very limited roles to women, so that she becomes 'an apostle to the apostles'. Jesus says to her, 'Go to my brothers and tell them...': she is given a very public role, as indeed was the Samaritan woman before her. In fact there are many dynamic, up-front women to be found in John's Gospel, suggesting that his community recognised their abilities and gave them commensurate status and public roles within the church.

The classic exposition of the theology of liberation was developed over thirty years ago now by Gustavo Gutierrez. Citing a document on missions in Latin America, he wrote (Gutierrez 1988:104-105):

All the dynamism of the cosmos and of human history, the movement towards the creation of a more just and fraternal world, the overcoming of social inequalities among persons, the efforts, so urgently needed on our continent, to liberate humankind from all that depersonalises it – physical and moral misery, ignorance and hunger – as well as the awareness of human dignity – all these originate, are transformed and reach their perfection in the saving work of Christ.

And the mother of African women's theologies Mercy Amba Oduyoye writes (2001:57)

It is only fair that single mothers and others whom the church excludes should be

enabled to see in Jesus Christ the friend who long ago entrusted one of their kind with the all important mission of announcing the Resurrection to his brothers.... the one who not only announces but also brings and lives good news.

These Third World liberation theologians pick up on the theme of freedom from personal and structural oppression that is inherent in Jesus' words, actions and lifestyle, and use it as a key resource for developing their own theologies; and they are among hundreds of others, both in the West and in the Third World, who use liberation as a central concept underpinning both theology and mission. Gutierrez in particular, working as a Roman Catholic within a church that in the 1970's remained strongly hierarchical according to his account, was aware that for the church, this was a new development; but it is profoundly rooted in the Bible, as we have seen in our reading of the power of the liberating word in the gospel of John. And they stand alongside John in another respect too: John's understanding of liberation and transformation is fully holistic, picking up on every aspect of human identity and calling people into a whole new way of life. Western Christianity has become better at this in recent years, moving away from a traditional focus on the spiritual at the cost of other aspects of human well-being; but I think we still have much to learn about how to achieve fully holistic liberation for humanity at every level.

The Word falls silent

Jesus' words, then, share in the creative power of God; they are transformative and liberative, recreating human life in line with the will of God expressed in that first creation. This is a message of hope; and yet sometimes, hope fails and we are left in silence. The last theme I wish to consider is the shift from word to silence – John's presentation of the Cross. John's discourse about the Cross is strikingly different from the three Synoptic Gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke are all concerned to defend their faith against the charge that they worship a crucified criminal, and so their presentation of Jesus' crucifixion is geared to demonstrate that he was wrongly condemned and died completely innocently, in accordance with God's plan as revealed in the Old Testament and particularly in Isaiah (*for example, Mark 15.10, 39*). John's approach is completely different. For him, this moment of Jesus' death is not a moment of shame or disgrace but of glory. Jesus has pointed his disciples to it from the early days of his ministry; when explaining his action in cleansing the Temple, he told the Jewish authorities 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' (2.19); and John adds the gloss that he is referring to the temple of his body, the new dwelling-place of God on earth. The seven miracles that John describes, under the name of 'signs', are clearly intended as a gradual revelation of Jesus' identity as Messiah and Son of Man; and many would add Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection to the list of revelatory signs. Jesus himself makes it clear that the final revelation of his identity will come only when he is 'lifted up': 8.28 reads,

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.

He returns to the theme, even more explicitly, in ch.12. First, he links his glorification to his annihilation: unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit (12.24). Then he explores the idea further (12.32):

When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.

The hour that is coming is the hour of his glory, when the Father's name will be glorified through him. And when we read on in John's account of the Last Supper, we find over and over again the theme of glory, the glory of the Father and of the Son of Man revealed in Jesus' hour. When the soldiers come to arrest Jesus, he has to help them through their task; when they recognise him they step back and fall to the ground (18.6) in an involuntary act of worship. In conversation with Pilate, Jesus cuts him down to size, reminding him that his power comes ultimately from God (19.11). Jesus is neither mocked by the soldiers nor flogged, and he is able to carry his own cross (19.17). His words from the Cross reflect concern for his mother and concern to fulfil the Scripture (19.26, 28), and when he is ready, he speaks his last word and then gives up his spirit (19.30). And what a last word: 'it is finished', one word in Greek, meaning not 'it's all over now' but 'it is accomplished', 'I have achieved it'. It's a statement of victory, not defeat; and most commentators think that John presents the Crucifixion as Jesus' exaltation and glorification by the Father, the moment at which he ascends to heaven via the lifting arms of the Cross⁹.

What are we to make of this transposition of an agonising, humiliating death into a triumphant vindication of everything Jesus has said and done during his ministry? It's the idea in John's Gospel I find hardest to cope with; like most of us who've worked overseas, I know plenty of people who have lost their lives, in traffic accidents or through sickness, and it becomes very difficult to see any meaning or sense in so many deaths. What is the link John sees between the silence of death and Jesus' victory? Why should the Word find victory in being silenced?

Let's go back to the image of a grain of wheat, used as a metaphor for death and resurrection by both John and Paul (1 Corinthians 15.37). If it falls into the ground and dies, if it loses its existence completely, then there is the possibility of new life as a fruit-bearing plant. But there has to be the period of silence in between, when you wait and anxiously look at the seed-bed, where nothing seems to be happening at all. So it is for the Word of God. Not just John's Gospel but the whole New Testament suggests that the incarnate life of Jesus is a seed-life, creating the conditions necessary for the fulness of life in the Spirit that is to follow; and it is necessary for the life of the Word to lose its nature, to fall silent, so that the multilingual life of the Spirit can come alive for the

disciples.

Falling silent. One of the people who had the most influence on my decision to offer for service overseas was an old lady, widow of a Methodist minister; they had been missionaries in China for some time before the war. When the Communists took over they had to leave, and for the best part of forty years there was silence. Her husband died in the mid-1970's, having known nothing but that silence. Then one day in the early '80's she phoned my mother: could we come? So we went, and there she was, clutching a letter in Chinese. China was changing; the people they had worked with all those years before had finally felt safe enough to write and tell her that they had kept the faith through all the years of oppression and danger; and now Christianity is a powerful, dynamic force in a rapidly changing country.

Falling silent. A key chapter in David Bosch's *magnum opus* is entitled 'Mission in a Time of Testing'. He lists factors which have tended to silence our mission work: the church has lost its position of privilege; in the traditional 'mission fields' the position of Western mission agencies and missionaries has undergone a fundamental revision; the missionary is not central to the life and the future of the 'younger churches'; and so on. Against this background, he goes on to explore the many aspects of an 'emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm' in ways which have been hugely influential ever since, indeed which have created the possibility of our missionary outreach in new and authentic ways.

Many factors have silenced our mission work: political change, cultural change, economic necessity. From our perspective, there are often painful losses of things we have worked hard at and cared about. John doesn't deny the pain; his Jesus is really dead, blood and water flowing from his pierced side (19.34). But death and silencing is the end of one stage, not a complete end. When the word becomes silent, it is a sign of completion, not defeat; a sign that the *missio Dei* is moving forward to a new stage. Sometimes that's hard to believe; sometimes it seems to take a long time for there to be any sign of change or growth. Nevertheless, for John, paradoxically, the silencing of the Word is the means to a new way of speaking through the power of the Spirit. Jesus has already explained this to his disciples (16.7, 12):

It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.....and he will guide you into all the truth.

Silence leads to renewed speech. We are only just beginning to hear the outlines of that speech, renewed for our time: in mission that is genuinely local within a global conversation, in mission that centres on reconciliation, in mission that integrates word and action (Kim 2005:xvii – xxi). But

John was aware of the power of the silenced but renewed word from the time he recorded his Gospel: 'these things have been written that you may believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and, believing, have life in his name' (20.31). And the heart of that mission is summed up in words from another text associated with John which revolves around the concepts of word and the content and means of mission: This is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that you should love one another (*1 John 3.11*).

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- 1 Stuckey 2005 *Beyond the Box: Mission Challenges from John's Gospel* Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House
- 2 Bosch 1991:390 writes 'The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.... Our mission has no life of its own; only in the hands of the sending God can it truly be called mission, not least since the missionary initiative comes from God alone.'
- 3 Sugirtharajah 2001:52 cites a Bible Society report of 1914: 'Not only the heathen, but the speech of the heathen, must be Christianised. Their language itself needs to be born again. Their very words have to be converted from foul meanings and base uses and baptised into a Christian sense, before those words can convey the great truths and ideas of the Bible'.
- 4 Thangaraj 1999:71: God is in solidarity with all of humanity, and therefore we are called to be in solidarity with all.
- 5 Sterk 2004:178-9
- 6 See Sugirtharajah 2001:66; he cites a BFBS report of 1914, describing translation work in Papua New Guinea: 'Moral ideas are now being introduced. Compulsion has come into the lives of the Papuans by the introduction of English law and justice. It is becoming easier to explain the New Testament by means of reference to the British Government'.
- 7 The interpretation of this passage is controversial; it may offer a coded description of the religious history of the Samaritans. See Webster 2003:135.
- 8 Brown 1979:35 - 40
- 9 Howard-Brook 1999:424 'The moment of death for the Johannine Jesus is a *kairos* of high liturgical ceremony'.