

Sleeves Rolled Up

Again and again, during my times in PKV (Persaudaraan Kristian Varsiti - UM's CF) we were challenged with these strong words: **The Church is becoming irrelevant.**

It was as though the statement was hammered hard into my head, making me ask myself, that whatever I do, can I be part of the solution?

Isaiah is one of my best loved prophet. Not least because the meditation in the book were written during some of the most difficult times of Israel. It is one of those scriptures which seemed to tell us that, hey, "god understand lah...see, some have seen worst problems". And of course not least because the theme of one of the most dramatic musicals ever produced by the Church, George Handel's Messiah were taken from Isaiah. Handel managed to embody in often tunes of risk and suspense the audacious expectation of hope even as the people of god were facing worst times.

Not least because Isaiah taught my what sort of a god I follow:

"YAHWEH has rolled up his sleeves and got down to work on his global rescue operation" (Isa 52:12)

What god is this! This is a vision of a god who was determined to get personal, who got down into the mud, who got his hands dirty, who insisted on doing it himself to right the wrongs, or to be part of the solution to the wrongs in the world.

And I think a lot of times, to follow the example of the god of Isaiah is precisely that, a determination to be part of the solution and going down all the way where this determination leads us to.

Going home was the **first step** of my journey. Leaving the promises of KL after my graduation seemed irrational to many people then, but I kept reminding myself, just do it. After all, a migration to seemly land of impossibility has got many biblical precedents, and as we can see, most of the time it works, probably for the fact that these places were not

overcrowded with people who cared enough, if not because of god's gracious hand making it work.

Second phase, forgoing or postponing the desire to go to a seminary. I have come to believe, through very very long contemplations after graduation that theology on its own is meaningless. I mean don't get me wrong, with due respect to many theologians and pastors and seminarians whom I honour and whom I personally know and fellowshiped with now and then, I believe that god did not meant for us "to do church". Instead we are called to "live life". And this involve interacting with all the complexity of human living, in all the areas of our experience, conveniently grouped into the science and the arts. I believe the study of "pure theology", the study of apologetics, critical as they are, do not present to us the vital tools to engage in such complexity.

But I do not at all despise a good theological education, which I would encourage everyone who is able to embark on it. It's just that, I believe theology must not be seen as a complete field of its own, but rather, like the medieval church, the crown of man's life experience, to be embraced together, not independant of the other areas of our experience. In another word, we must realized the place of theology, including its value and limitations

For this reason, I would encourage Christians who consider taking up a theological degree to consider working on a non-theological degree first or later at a post graduate level. Theological study on its own is meaningless.

Third, I experimented with "the things we said" in CF and in Church. We talked about being the salt and light. We talked about market place ministry. We talked about being relevant. All within the safe compound of the University. Although those of us in UM (and perhaps some of you elsewhere) knew for sure that even within the University, it was a challenge to live a counter-culture Christian life.

In my present company, I have worked for two years now, in a junior level of management, heading a team of 5 executives from various departments in the factory.

It was here, I received the rude awakening of a "real world" promised to us beyond the walls of the University. What rat race and what dog-eats-dog world; I found that the sort of Christian living which we talked about - to

float above the worldly stuff - can never be successfully embraced unless we become a schizophrenic person, our "real life" on one hand and our "church life" on the other. And this was to be the truth to many of the people we know. Church, with all that she represented on the pulpit become a sort of Sunday therapeutic escapade from the grudges of the grunt jobs throughout the week.

I realized that more than to convert my colleagues and friends at work, my main task is to declare with words and deeds the good news of the renewed Creation.

I chose to see my work as a vocation and realizing that in the newness of life, Jesus the Gardener of Mary (John 20:15) has healed the garden so that our labour is not like that on the old cursed ground. As I show enthusiasm and passion into my work, I am encouraging a sort of awe, "how come work is never toil?"

Step by step, I encourage a more humane management and dealings with the people I worked with - colleagues, clients, vendors. There are many times I came across as strict or uncompassionate by others, but again and again, when my group members came and tell me that it's refreshing working in our team and we are a unique team, I know that there is something different and commendable in what we have done together. It is obvious to everyone at the end of the day, even to the bosses, that our working manners and our team strength are revolutionary within a work environment which has been inculcated for more than a decade.

So you see, within our team, we managed to be as competitive within the industry as possible without negotiating on the real and important thing in life, life itself. I realized the importance to encourage and expand the quality of being a real human being, with a balance in work and play.

Everyone will have work related stress, two persons I know recently suffered from some sort of a work-related nervous breakdown. How then we create a balance one may ask? We did this by bringing in compassion and love and kindness and kinship into our team, making sure work although may be a grudge, no one is without a human support and affirmation and at the end of the day, life is what matters; it is never "the end of the world" at work. You see, I want to encourage the reality of life in the Kingdom of God, life where there is never "the end of the world".

I think in all these, Isaiah's vision of a "god who rolled up his sleeves and got down into the mud" became my vision to spur me on at handling all things with a personal passion. Passion is very important to our religion and I believe that is the force which fuel me, from my journeying back to my hometown to my work place to my whole life. And this Passion can never be more powerful than the passion shown by Jesus, who on the cross, his bleeding and bare naked arm (bare naked arm - that's Isaiah 52:10 isn't it?) stretched across the wood, demonstrated more than ever, the "god who rolled up his sleeves and got down into the mud". My friends, receive the passion as you gaze on Jesus and receive his Spirit; and start your journey today.

Sim Chee Keong, Steven