"Do You Love Me? Feed My Sheep."

John 21:16

We don't often study the book of Lamentations. In chapter 2 verse 19 we read, ***"Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin. Pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord. Lift up your hands to Him for the lives of your children (disciples) who faint from hunger at the head of every street."***

It is clear from the media that all is not well with the world or with the church or with us as believers. Proper treatment depends on correct diagnosis. Diagnosis depends on accurate observation and proper interpretation. A proper framework is essential.

What is the present state of the world as far as Muslims are concerned? The symptoms are hate, fear, distrust, rivalries, dishonesty and callousness. ***"The whole world lies in wickedness."*** (1 Jn. 5:19) What is the diagnosis as to the cause of our problems? Separation from God and His ways has led to death and corruption. The world at present is in the power of the prince of this world – Satan.

What are some of the treatments that have been applied?

Education – this has failed us in the West.

Physical well-being – jobs and housing for everyone doesn't appear to be working well in the industrialised countries despite the claims of the communists.

Humanism – in Western countries this has failed. Why do accomplished humanists, who are expected to be unerring in their selection of values in our "modern" society in conformity with accepted norms of behaviour, turn out to be politicians greedy for power or industrialists/businessmen who are without integrity in their dealings and supremely indifferent to the poverty and sufferings of their fellow human beings?

As believers in the Lord Jesus, we claim we have **the answer** and in reality we do! There are millions of restless disappointed and frustrated people who are ready to hear it! They want to believe there is no situation so desperate, no government so corrupt, but that someone – the Lord Jesus – can redeem and recreate the situation.

Sadly, even in our churches (certainly in the West) there is evidence of the same symptoms we see in the world rather than evidence of "the Fruit of the Spirit". The diagnosis is that something is spiritually rotten in the world. Satan is in command – neatly disguised. In our churches we can see the same symptoms including frustration. The diagnosis is the same – spiritual rottenness.

Satan intends to hang onto this world and every person and thing in it. The Lord Jesus intends to redeem it and in reality has already done so. There is intense warfare in the "heavenlies" and we see the manifestation of this in the countries where we work. As believers in the Lord Jesus we should be able to give people the real interpretation of history and of man's needs – ***"Man does not live by bread alone"*** (Lk. 4:4). We should be the ones to know and demonstrate the power of God and be able to bring it to bear on our current problems.

The forces against us have more power because of our ignorance of Satan's tactics, devices and disguises. This is why the Lord Jesus commanded us to ***"Watch and pray"*** (Mt. 26:41; Mk. 14:38; Lk. 21:36). Here are a few of Satan's tactics.

1. Belittling Satan and spiritual warfare
2. Reliance on worldly weapons – as effective as toy pistols!
3. De-personalising the Lord Jesus – clinging to principles rather than a person – stressing ideals or the ideal society. The implication of this is that the historical Lord Jesus is unnecessary.

4. Being tolerant of all views. No! We claim that the Lord Jesus is the only Saviour.
5. Non-believers often appropriate believers' ideals. In Hinduism Krishna was "born" in the 8th century A.D. By this time there had been Christians in India for nearly 700 years. The legends of Krishna and the Gita were developed to counteract Christian influence.
6. Conforming to worldly standards.
7. Red tape: New Testament "outreach" of the 12 and Paul and his team had a great deal of simplicity. Compare this with our day and all the reports, audits etc. that take up so much time that would otherwise be given to Bible study, prayer, witnessing etc.
8. Playing down the work of the Holy Spirit. Remember that the early disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem (Acts 1:5) until (Acts 1:13) the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.
9. So often efforts are made to escape the Cross and we reap what we sow!
10. Minimising key factors: the Lord Jesus did not say, *"I think it would be a nice idea if you began to love one another."* He said, ***"This is my command …."*** (Jn. 15:12, 17).

What about our role in the world?

We will never be a "majority" community in the places where we work. So we must find ways that we can become, to some degree, indispensable so the "majority" will welcome us. Often this is not self-evident to most locals. Local believers from a Muslim background must develop into a community of economic and spiritual independence.

We must also demonstrate that it is possible to have unity in diversity. The "market place" demonstrates this: different languages, costumes, customs, food etc. yet all one in making money.

Working for the coming day of the Lord's return

Some lessons from the old churches in Asia

In the first five or six centuries after Pentecost, hundreds of lay workers were sent out by the Church of the East. It was outside the Roman Empire and was based in what is now Iran and eastern Turkey. [The church of the West Mediterranean area was under Roman Emperors.] In the 8th century this Church of the East had about 80 million believers with 60 "archbishops" not to mention ordinary bishops.

What happened to these churches? In China they gradually faded away. In Japan they became the Shingon sect of Buddhism. In the Philippines they were gathered into the Roman Catholic Church when the Spanish came. Amazingly there are still about 200,000 left in India and in the Middle East.

Muslim persecution accounts for some of the loss, but analysis reveals the major reason was that they drifted away from a personal love of the Lord Jesus! The Prophet Muhammad apparently spent nearly 3 years visiting a Church of the East seminary in Jerusalem. Kobo Daishi, the founder of Shingon Buddhism, spent three years in a Church of the East seminary in China.

Four main factors practically wiped out the Church of the East.

- Compromises with the ideas of their non-Christian neighbours.
- Neglect of God's Word: they had the Bible in an old language which soon became extinct in eastern Turkey. There was no Bible translation, so over time the members of the Church of the East looked elsewhere rather than to the Lord Jesus.
- They lacked contact with other believers especially after the collapse of the Roman Empire.

What do believers from a non-believing background need?

1. They need to be weaned as soon as possible. They need to grow up spiritually. Too much "mothering" will cripple them.

2. They need to desire to know the Lord Jesus – Himself not just His blessings. So the question is, "How much does the Lord Jesus mean to me? There should be no compromise. It is on His authority, not our own, that we claim Him as **the only Saviour**.

3. They need to rely on the Holy Spirit. Sadly, He has been neglected. If we don't teach about Him, new believers won't know who He is much less how He works or how to obey Him.

4. They need to know how to have real fellowship with other believers. The Lord Jesus commanded us, ***"Love one another as I have loved you"*** (Jn. 15:12). This means taking responsibility for one another – prayer, having work parties to help each other, having communion together. The most characteristic operation of the Holy Spirit is the creation of a loving, supportive fellowship.

5. They need to know how to witness **personally** in all circumstances with constant dependence on the Holy Spirit's help and guidance mostly gained on our knees. They also need to know how to witness **corporately**. ***"By this shall all men know …"*** (Jn. 13:35). This speaks about our ability to get along with each other and the quality of love and caring among us. We must learn to express appreciation of each other's contributions in meetings and other public forums. We don't only need to talk to one another. We also need to listen to God. We don't want majority votes. We want to hear the Master's voice. So the key is to be co-operative instead of competitive.

6. In our western churches the art of listening to God has largely been lost. This is one of our great lacks. We are good at debating issues and taking a majority vote rather than listening to His voice. This means that we don't go from our group meetings with a sense of mission – a sense that we are going out to do God's will. Instead we sense that we decided something with little reference to God.

   Listening to God ends in conquest. Simply listening to ourselves ends in collapse. We should think and pray together until we can say, ***"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us …."*** (Acts 15:28). It is clear that the Lord Jesus likes variety. He has made us all unique individuals. Our fingerprints are different. The police tell us our ears are different. The doctors tell us that the patterns of the blood vessels at the back of our eyes are different. Dogs have always known that our smells are different.

7. Get your disciples into situations where they can't cope and see them transformed. Remember, at the feeding of the 5000 the initial response of the disciples was, ***"Send them away"***. The Lord replied, ***"Give them something to eat"*** (Mk. 6:37). The Holy Spirit is always ready to guide and to help.

Specific suggestions

Maybe this isn't an entirely accurate diagnosis, but I can give you some treatments.

1. **<u>Witness</u>**: all of us have this responsibility. The early church leaders had their secular vocations and every member realised his/her call to make the Lord Jesus known. Today we urgently need "non-professional" effective ministry.

2. **<u>Study God's Word</u>**: many believers are spiritually undernourished.

3. **<u>Claim everywhere for the Lord Jesus</u>**: we need believers in the medical professions, in the teaching professions, as writers, journalists, scientists of all sorts, businessmen etc. We must become indispensable to the society we are called to serve.

4. **<u>Sow the seed</u>**: we must broadcast the seed of the Word of God through books, DVDs, radio, satellite TV (especially dramas) etc.

5. **<u>Maintain fellowship</u>** with other groups/churches. "If we don't hang together, we will hang separately!"

6. **<u>Build and strengthen the families of believers</u>.**

7. **<u>Cut down on paperwork as much as possible. Increase "knee work</u>".** From among the national believers choose an apprentice. Ask the Lord for one. Make him/her a true "yoke fellow". National believers often say, "You love us, but it seems you don't like us!"
8. **<u>Invite believers</u>** from different groups around to your house.

There is only one thing we must do <u>at all costs</u> and that is to **maintain a relationship with the Lord Jesus**. At all times and in all circumstances we must refer to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. We must be completely at His disposal. I think that perhaps there will be only one question asked at the Judgement Seat. The Lord Jesus will ask us, ***"Do you love Me?"*** He asks us that question now. When we reply, "Yes, Lord", He commands us, ***"Feed My sheep."***