

THE COWS HAVE ARRIVED
MARK 1:40-42; 5:25-34; MATTHEW 9:10-12
2025-10-25

Last week we talked about the church in Cuba, a Communist state, where there should be no church, because the official policy of the government is that God does not exist. In spite of that, we saw that the church is not only alive and well, but that some truly amazing things were happening. The government saw the many benefits and blessings that the church was bringing to all the people of Cuba. Fidel Castro invited the Greek Orthodox Church to open churches in the 10 largest cities of Cuba. We talked about God arranging 1 on 1 Bible studies between Raul Sanchez and Fidel. We saw Cardinal Jamie Ortega freeing over 53 political prisoners, and we acquainted ourselves with Carlos, the pastor at Quatros Aquinas, building fences when no cows were even around. When questioned, he said he had no idea where the cows would come from, but that they would come. All great examples of faith, and how God is present in even the most challenging of circumstances. We don't take God to others; He's already there—and He's already active.

When our seminary took this trip, we gathered many supplies, including \$10,000 worth of medical supplies and cash—enough for Carlos to buy fourteen cows. Indeed, the cows were coming! The cows have come! Carlos' faithful action has been met by God's faithful grace and blessing.

God is a mission God. "Mission", in Greek, means "send". Our God is a sending God. He "sent" His only Son into the world on the greatest mission ever contemplated, to seek and save the lost, the entire world, one person at a time. Because Jesus completed His mission successfully, the world has been redeemed; through faith in the blood of Christ shed for our sins, we've been reconciled to God; we have peace with God. We're justified by faith in Christ.

But the mission doesn't end with Christ, although He is first and last in it. It's a great paradox, that the God who says "*Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters, and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.*" or the God who says "*Come to me, all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest.*" is the same God who says "*Go—and make disciples of all nations.*" So, our God is a sending God—and we're sent people. Each of us has a mission, a purpose that God sets on our hearts—to love Christ and to live Christ in our world. Every one of us is a missionary! Though this story unfolded in Cuba, it is only an example of what God is doing all over the world.

Everyone is paid in Cuba, still it's unsettling to see hordes of people walking the city streets and the country roads in the middle of the day because they don't have work, or because getting to work is so challenging with inadequate transportation. The monthly wage is \$17-\$30.00. But, just to show you the difference in cultural values, admission to the National Ballet is the equivalent of 50 cents. In Cuba, the culture is not only for all the people, it belongs to all the people. With the financial hardships, unlimited government handouts are unsustainable, so

the government has been dabbling for many years with limited free enterprise, particularly in the areas of hospitality, entertainment and tourism. It's not unusual to see doctors moonlighting in the evenings, musically, where an evening's tips pay more than a month's wages!

I want to go back to Carlos. When he was in his mid-school years, he kept hearing from his teachers that there is no God. He told his father it was too difficult—he was going to leave the Christian way. His father told him: “Your grandmother gave me a very precious treasure when I was young. That treasure is Jesus Christ. Only stupid people throw away treasure.” That was enough, needless to say, to keep Carlos on the right path.

He's not the picture of a pastor. When we met him, he was in rubber boots and had worked up a sweat from physical labour. Though he'd been pastor there for eleven years, he shared that it was only in the last five years that he really acquired a vision for the church. He was quite funny. He said the archbishop kept visiting him and really bugging him about what his vision was for the church. He said what do you mean? I pastor 40 people and try to meet all their needs: what more of a vision is there than that? But the archbishop kept pestering him. Finally the vision came. I told you about the cattle. But that's only the tip of the iceberg. He's become a manager. We took fabric with us because there are women of the church doing a sewing ministry for the community, particularly children who need clothing. Three men lost their jobs the month prior to our arrival. He found work for them on the farm. The farm needed sesame oil and found it to be way too expensive. Carlos' father devised an oil extractor that is eight times more efficient than any extractor in Cuba. They earned \$6,000 annually from the oil that gets converted into food for the nearby seminary. They have a church baseball team—a passion in Cuba. What's different is that they set up games with inmates from the nearby federal prison—they've become a living testimony to the sheep in Matthew 25. They have a cannery where they conserve pickles—again, the profits are rolled out to serve community and church needs. When asked why he did all this, Carlos responded simply, yet profoundly, “So the church can be the church. It's about discipleship. The world needs to see the transforming love of Jesus. People need encouragement to see and share the love of Christ.” When we got back to the seminary in Matanzas, we asked the Principal what the greatest need was for the church. He said, without question, it's providing pastors with a dependable stipend. The 40 plus people in the congregation could hardly meet their own needs, let alone contribute to the church, though they do what they can. Dale Woods, the principal at Presbyterian College, figured out that giving 40 ministers each \$40 a month—higher than the high side of the wage given to every Cuban—would cost \$20,000 per year—\$10 per week from a congregation could sustain a pastor in Cuba for a year. Compare that to the \$70,000 per year cost to train a missionary to go to Turkey! Much more is expected from pastors there than here.

I mentioned Raul Sanchez last week, the leader of the MLK Centre in Havana. He described liberation theology as a road theology, rather than a balcony theology. Carlos' work is an example. So, what is it? Raul referred to it as faith for the people and as a freedom theology. Each of the Scriptures this morning, and we could have selected so many more, reveal God as a

liberator of the oppressed. God freed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and led them personally through and out of the wilderness to the Promised Land.

Freedom from sins through Christ and His personal call or leading us to a renewed, restored life with God lands us in heaven—our promised land. There's always the portrayal of Jesus as the defender of the poor, weak, sick, downtrodden, disadvantaged. The oppressed and impoverished in the third world have taken to Jesus in this regard in droves. Latin America is experiencing an evangelism explosion, while North American Christians wrestle with the "death of God". For many Latin Americans, Canada and the U.S. are the new mission fields. Jesus is the champion of the poor; He spent much time with and was loved by outcasts He proclaimed children of God. The poor are encouraged to engage the Bible directly in light of their lives and concerns, to find themselves in the Bible. In personal caring, the sense of personal worth, the spontaneous expression of joy in worship and missionary outreach, believers are empowered to openly witness to their faith. Evangelism happens in within the context of empathy with human suffering—proclaiming the Gospel while alleviating suffering with concrete acts of help. Evangelization includes taking seriously the local context of poverty and injustice through social action. Salvation in Jesus becomes a miracle of survival in the marginality of life. Christ, through the Holy Spirit, provides a sense of dignity and empowerment for both personal evangelism and social change. There's a constant dependence on God to give us this day our daily bread and to deliver us from evil.

The demographic centre of the Church has shifted to the Southern Hemisphere. The result is a new global Christianity articulated by non-Western Christians, where the Gospels are seen as missionary documents written by and for Christians engaged in mission and that each believer has a great commission. We're co-actors and partners in the missionary work of God. Missions is not one of the things we do in church. Who we are and what we do in total reflects **the** mission of God.

There are more Anglicans in Kenya today than in Britain, the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand combined. On Wednesday evenings, the huge city of Buenos Aires is clogged by traffic jams of people going to midweek Bible studies. Hundreds and hundreds of young people are offering themselves for the mission fields of those unreached by the Gospel. Countries that were the receivers of missionaries have become salt shakers of missionaries.

We visited a church in downtown Matanzas, called Kairos, which means "at the appointed time". The church took an intentional look at the whole community. It leaned heavily on the arts, including hiring professional artists to help it depict spiritual and community aspects on murals, and hiring a professional conductor for their choir. There was a social gospel at work here; the question is, what's at the core? In an hour of listening to what the church was about, there was no mention of Christ, nor His Lordship over the church. The intention of Liberation Theology is to go to the people, and what they see will bring them to Christ. The church doors were wide open; people just dropped in for coffee/conversation/work on some art or craft. It was

quite casual and chaotic in terms of continuous street noise. Yet it was invitational and exuded hospitality.

I went for a couple of runs while I was in Matanzas. The seminary is at the top of a large hill overlooking downtown. The first morning I ran down hill to a bus route and followed the main street to the ocean. I've never experienced such bad air pollution! Another surprise was seeing men cutting a boulevard with hand scythes, their backs bent low to the ground! When I finally saw a man with a power mower, it was the one my Dad threw out thirty-five years ago at the end of its life then. The mower wasn't running, but the man was pushing it along. When I went for my next run, I didn't want to repeat the same smoggy route, so I ran through some back roads. I got out to the ocean road, but on the way back, somehow I made a wrong turn and got lost, which never happens. The further I ran up this mountain, the worse the roads got until I was finally on a dirt track and so far away from the seminary that someone trying to help me asked if I had a car, since the seminary was so far away. I was pretty exhausted, running longer than an old guy like me should, and all up hill at that, but with help I made it back. There's a spiritual application here. When you're lost, how are you found? Do you keep running in the wrong direction? There's One who's never lost you. When God asked Adam, "Where are you?" do you think He didn't know? God knew not only Adam's physical location, but his spiritual condition as well!

What can we learn from these churches? How can we reach out to our community and share what we know and have? How can we extend our hospitality to others and exude the warmth and joy that these people and churches did? Talk that up with someone this week.