



Malvern Mashal 143



Heavenly Maths at work

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Throughout Church history God often chooses to set certain of His servants aside to do specific tasks and to meet with them in ways that could not have happened in busier places. It's the angel of the Lord wrestling with Jacob: it's God meeting Moses in the wilderness, it's Cuthbert and Columba on remote northern islands from which unlikely places they took the gospel right across the nation, it's John Wycliffe being rejected by the church authorities and being forced to leave Oxford and translating the bible into English as a result; it's John Bunyan in prison refusing the poison tipped offer of his captors to be granted his freedom if only he would promise not to preach the gospel.

It's Martin Luther at Wartburg castle translating the Bible into German, and so many others who have reached a place of deeper anointing and a sphere of greater influence as a result of standing alone with God. You may well have noticed in your own life how God sometimes has to get you on your own in order to do His deepest work, rather as Jesus Himself ultimately accomplished more in terms of saving the world when He died on the cross than when He was out and about ministering to the sick and needy.

This is so entirely counter-intuitive both to the ethos of modern life and to standard Christian expectations and theology that it is worth pondering in a little more detail.

John's time on Patmos appears to the outward eye to be essentially passive, in which things were done to him rather than him being able to initiate things for himself, but it ended up in

powerful revelations rather than in emptiness and fruitlessness.

There is heavenly maths at work here. One yielded heart plus God can sometimes accomplish more than God plus a bustling heart. To put that another way, effective doing often comes out of determined being with the Lord. Even when something precious, like John's ministry to the churches around Ephesus, comes to a full-stop, or even a seeming death, we must be prepared to hand it back to the Lord and trust that He knows what He is doing, so that His *new* purposes can flow.

This is all part of what is meant when the Lord Jesus declares that He was dead but behold He is alive for evermore. For death itself is but the passing point, the transition to the glory of Heaven – which is not far away, but just another dimension – and the stronger our longing for Heaven, the more in tune we will be with His heart, and the more able we are to realise our at-one-ness with the Lord - which is the original meaning of at-one-ment - because 'onement' is the old English word for unity. Our Union with Christ is so precious to Him and to us.

Which brings us to another important point. When we see people making choices that, in our opinion, look likely to cramp and restrict the work of the Holy Spirit, **it is often tricky to know whether to point these things out, or just to lift the situation to the Lord and leave Him to sort it out.** Given that our perspective is by no means bound to be right, it can often be a kindness even, to let people find things out for themselves.

But the Scriptures also remind us that 'Open rebuke is better than hidden love' and that *'Whoever rebukes a person will in the end gain more favour than the one who has a flattering tongue.'*

I often prefer to give prophetic hints rather than having to spell things out, because the spiritually sensitive will cotton on and act accordingly. But some people are so lacking in empathy that they simply cannot read between the lines and take a hint, and need to have matters spelt out to them.

If we're concerned for each other's eternal well-being, we can't afford to be fluffy and floozy! Think what a disaster it would have been for the future of the Church if Paul not confronted Peter in the way he did in Galatians 2:11-13.

What if John on Patmos had received God's warnings for the seven churches but then kept them to himself? These were perspectives that needed to be widely shared.

Are there warnings the Lord would have you pass on to people?

Other matters that you should just take privately to God?

Are you open to be corrected yourself?

On Patmos John was facing a constant barrage of at best indifference from the authorities, and at worst outright hostility. This is exactly what Jesus experienced throughout His public ministry, and it is impossible to describe how sapping this can be. Almost all His miracles were done against a backdrop of prying eyes – hostile Pharisees, sceptical Sadducees, Roman informants – just as millions of government spies in the former East Germany spied on the whole nation, or as is currently happening today in countries like North Korea.

This can make life so wearing and so dangerous for believers, but the wonderful thing is that Jesus didn't do what so many leaders do and allow constant misunderstanding and hostility to slow Him down, or incline Him to retreat into something theoretically safer, but that would actually have crushed the life of the

Spirit. He allowed nothing to deter Him from pressing on with His mission.

Too many of us are only willing to step out if conditions appear favourable – a nice warm room full of friendly, supportive people and the comforting sense of the Holy Spirit. Most of the missionaries whom God has really used did not see three thousand people come to Christ with the first time they preached the gospel, but had to persevere through years of intense hostility and discouragement until the gospel took root in new regions.

The first Protestant missionary to China saw just one convert in the first decade of his ministry – and I rather think he backslid – and only one more in the next ten years. Who could have guessed then that this incredibly small-scale work in a formidably hostile country would one day expand to bring millions of Christians seeking the Lord with a fervour we know all too little of in the rational west.

It is reckoned that by 2050 China will have more Christians in than any other country in the world, but there's no room for complacency, that still leaves an awful lot who have yet to meet the High King of Heaven, of atheists – not to mention the fact that it is also expected that there will be more Muslims in that country than anywhere else in the world too. But just think of all that would have been missed if these early missionaries had concluded that the ground was too hard and gone back home! People paid a high price to sow the seed of the gospel in Chinese soil and in so many other places too.

Praise God for today's pioneers, too. Whether the soil they are sowing in primarily stony or fertile, may they be faithful and creative. Why not take some time now to pray for those who are raising their heads above the parapet and paying the cost to take their stand in public places for the Lord.