

And I went to Vietnam....

Before coming here to Sarawak, I decided to visit Vietnam, a country I had never been to before. While there, I spent a few days in Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City, and was taken on a tour of the city, which included a visit to the War Remnants museum, previously called "the War Crimes Museum". It was not a rabid denunciation of American atrocities in Vietnam, but it did contain some shocking pictures, one of which was a large picture of a group of women and children shot dead by soldiers and in front of this picture was a small exhibition case containing the clothes of two small children. The clothes had been washed, but the bullet holes could still be clearly seen. I was deeply moved.

War is so often presented in terms of black and white and war criminals are nearly always taken from the ranks of those who lost the war - but the fact remains: those children were shot by someone. He was probably an ordinary boy from an ordinary home, but a boy who had taken a journey, a journey, which led him to that awful place, where he thought it was ok to turn his gun on those two small children. But, where, I wonder, did it begin and how did his journey take that downward track, which brought him to that place in Vietnam?

I read, recently, about an experiment conducted at an American University, the aim of which was to observe changes in behaviour, when people are put into positions of either complete power or helplessness. Some students were divided into two groups – supposedly guards and prisoners - and prison conditions were simulated. As the experiment progressed over a period of weeks, those who had the power became increasingly abusive of the prisoner group until eventually the prisoner group revolted and the so-called guards used violence to put it down. This seems to bear out the old adage that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. In situations, such as Vietnam, where one person or group has power over others who are defenceless, there seems to be an almost inevitable decline into abuse.

There is, however, an exception to this – and that is in the family. Here we see helpless babies at the mercy of their parents, who have almost absolute power over them and whereas we know that abuse sometimes occurs in families, it is far from the norm. What is it, then, in a family that protects the child even though it is completely helpless? It is, of course, love. We can surround people with laws in an attempt to protect the weak, the helpless or the aged, but you can abuse people even while keeping the law. The only thing that really protects helpless people is that they are loved and respected. This is why cultures develop customs of courtesy – shaking hands, greeting someone with a title: "Sir, Madam, Bapak, Ibu etc., for courtesy is the concretisation of love – and the first stage of love is respect. When people are taught to use words and customs of respect, the door is open for them to be taken up into the inner dynamism of those customs and start on the road of love. But, when these small and seemingly insignificant gestures are dropped or thought to be irrelevant, the direction of a person's life changes and the road to Vietnam begins. And it is very difficult to be polite and respectful to those about you when are carrying a gun and are under attack.

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This was why, in the Early Church, serving soldiers were not allowed to become Christians. It was thought that their profession was inimical to being a Christian – the two things, love and war, just could not go together. However, as time passed, it was seen that while this was very difficult, it was, nevertheless, possible and, to show this, devotion to heroic Christian soldiers, such as St George, came into the Church. We now accept that a soldier can be a Christian, even if he does carry a gun, but reminders, such as that exhibition in Vietnam, are still necessary, for they remind us what can happen, when the courtesies and respectful ways of speaking and acting are discarded – without them we are on the road to Vietnam!

My last four years, in Malaysia, before I left in 1984, had been spent founding a seminary. We began it from scratch and many things had to be decided on and done on the spur of the moment. Fortunately, there were a lot of seminarians to help do these things and I got accustomed to working in "command mode". Then, I had to leave Malaysia and I went back to England and stayed, for a while, with my Mother. My sister and brother-in-law and their three teenage sons lived nearby and I often got my nephews to do things for me. However, they did so with greater and greater reluctance, until one day, one of them said, "No!" I was puzzled and upset and asked my brother-in-law what was wrong. He very gently told me that I had not been asking them to do things, but telling them. I realised that in Malaysia, I had got into the habit of dropping those small courtesies, which are the protection of the powerless and I had been brought up short by the revolt of my nephews. I remembered this, as I was thinking about those two small dresses that exhibition case and I realised that, although that I had newly come to Saigon, this was not the first time I had taken the road to Vietnam.

Diary

On the way to Mass, one day, in Saigon, I passed a young girl, who tried to sell me chewing gum. I told her that I did not eat chewing gum and she gave me a great big smile, patted my belly and said, "Happy Buddha!" In that part of the world, the Buddha is not portrayed in blissful, quiet meditation, instead he is shown with a bald head, a big belly and a broad smile on his face. To touch such a statue of the Buddha is considered to bring good luck. On the way back to my hotel after Mass, I saw the girl again, and when she saw me, she made a beeline for me and with a great smile, touched my belly again and said, "Happy Buddha!" This time, her faith was rewarded – and I gave her some money!

I am now in St Peter's College, Kuching, the seminary for East Malaysia. It is the one I helped found some 27 years ago. It is just like coming home, for I have many friends here, but it is always a shock to realise that those young men and women of 27 years ago are now getting old – and some are even grandparents. The shock is even greater if I have not seen them for many years. But, of course, it is only them who are getting older – not me!!!

God bless,

Terry

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ps. My new adress, when I return to Bali, is at the bottom, as is my mobile number here in Sarawak, in case you want to call me.

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