



AN INEXPRESSIBLE GRIEF:

**LAMENTING THE GRIEF
AND TRAUMA
OF WAR-TORN SRI LANKA**

**A REPORT ON THE STRUGGLE OF PASTORS IN THE
JAFFNA DIOCESE OF THE CHURCH OF SOUTH INDIA
TO GIVE VOICE TO THE VOICELESS**

JOHN BOTTOMLEY

MARCH 2010

Published by
CREATIVE MINISTRIES NETWORK
P.O. Box 362
St. Kilda 3182
Australia

Telephone (03) 9827 8322

Web page: www.cmn.unitingcare.org.au

Published March 2010

**AN INEXPRESSIBLE GRIEF:
The loss of voice to lament the grief and trauma of war-torn Sri Lanka**

© John Bottomley

John Bottomley asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

ISBN 978-0-9806434-3-5

Printed and bound in Bendigo, Victoria
by Bendigo UnitingCare Outreach Print Service

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Foreword

The Rev John Bottomley's *AN INEXPRESSIBLE GRIEF: The loss of voice to lament the grief and trauma of war-torn Sri Lanka*" published by the Creative Ministries Network, St Kilda, Australia is certainly a classic of our times.

Rev. Bottomley is the chairperson of the Sri Lanka Partnership Project Committee which operates from Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. He participated as our guest at the 62nd Anniversary Festival of the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India (JDCSI) on the 2nd November 2009.

During his stay here, he conducted two workshops with our pastors and this report is an account of them which is unique in many ways. They express without an iota of doubt how the Reverend Bottomley must have wrestled with himself to understand the issues that contributed, as he has precisely said, to the inexpressible grief of the first line of leaders of the community at the very eye of the horrendous civil conflagration who had to face the grief and trauma of the people who had become innocent victims of a long drawn-out war.

The participants were our pastors who braved themselves remarkably to the demands that were made on them.

The first workshop quite appropriately focused on the ministries of our pastors where pastoral care is pivotal and fundamental to their calling. The second workshop went further and deeper on the challenges that demanded responding to the grief and trauma that totally overwhelmed the ministers, congregations and the community rendering them utterly at a loss.

There is no doubt the Rev. Bottomley has done a great deal of prior preparation for these two workshops during his short stay among us and his compassionate nature to respond to the terrible nightmares the participant pastors faced, to some even in their own personal lives, is clearly evident.

It almost appeared that he had demanded God in his meditations to guide him to the crux of the matter and give him the strength and wisdom to use these two workshops to counsel our pastors to understand and appreciate that "when such challenges take us past our human limits, the God of mercy comes to give voice to the deep murmuring of our hearts," and the Rev. Bottomley was quite confident of it.

We are grateful for this intensely committed study based on the terrible experiences our pastors have undergone which they spontaneously shared at the workshops.

True to the way it was handled and the commitment of the Rev. Bottomley to assist and inspire our ministers, and indeed our community in its entirety, the report is not just about the painful realities only of what we all had to face, especially our pastors in their various parishes but also it energizes us with hope with the assurances in the scriptures of God's providential grace.

These two workshops, I must emphasize, were themselves an exceptional ministry the Rev. John Bottomley had come forward to share with our pastors and it becomes a document of great strength and inspiration to the community.

+ Rt. Rev. Dr Daniel S. Thiagarajah
Bishop of the Church of South India
in the Jaffna Diocese, Sri Lanka.

Preface

This booklet provides an account of two workshops I conducted with the pastors of the Jaffna Diocese, Church of South India (JDCSI) on Saturday 31 October and Tuesday 3 November 2009. It is an account of inexpressible grief and sorrow by these faithful and committed ministers.

The opportunity to lead these workshops was offered to me by the Bishop of JDCSI, the Rt. Revd. Bishop Daniel S. Thiagarajah. As Chairperson of the Melbourne-based Sri Lanka Partnership Project Committee, I was the Bishop's and Diocesan Council's guest for the 62nd Anniversary Festival of JDCSI. The pastors of the Diocese came from all over the country to be part of this annual Festival.

During the workshops, I learned that none of the pastors had escaped the trauma and suffering of Sri Lanka's civil war, and some also carried the trauma of the tsunami that devastated that country. They carried the grief of their own losses as well as the losses of their congregations and the communities their churches served.

Yet for a Diocese that understood its calling to be a voice for the voiceless, there were many occasions when these pastors were so burdened they could not speak. This was a painful and confusing reality for many of them.

Underneath the personal anguish of their inability to give voice to their sorrow and the despair of those amongst whom they ministered was the devastating reality of the civil war for this predominantly Tamil-speaking Church. Two people on separate occasions described the defeat of the Tamil Tigers as an event that put the Tamil people further back in Sri Lanka than where they had been thirty years ago.

Their reflection on the Tigers' military defeat by the government forces recognised that the Tamil Tigers had been for more than a decade the only public voice for the Tamil people in Sri Lankan affairs. While they had achieved this status of being a single unitary public voice for the Tamil people by silencing other Tamil voices through brutal and often murderous means, there was a hope in the Tamil community that the Tigers may deliver greater justice for them in the nation. The defeat of the Tigers has extinguished that hope, and appears to have left many in the Tamil community in despair. The cost of the thirty years of civil war has not been worth the loss of life and destruction, and has left a whole community feeling voiceless in their nation.

It is as if the end of thirty years of civil war and the plight of over 280,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) has released a deep sorrow and grief in the Tamil community, while at the same time casting a dark cloud of fear and depression over the community that has rendered them voiceless.

The pastors' workshops struggled with the profound paradox of how to speak the unspeakable, or how to give voice to the voiceless when they too felt unable to speak. Perhaps the greatest comfort for us all was in knowing that when such challenges take us past our human limits, the God of mercy comes to give voice to the deep murmuring of our hearts. This is the great promise of Paul, "Likewise the

Spirit helps us in our weakness: for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26 New RSV)).

This report moves between the painful realities these ministers face on a daily basis, and the assurances in scripture of God's providential grace. It is a conversation I was privileged to be part of, and one that I trust can grow as our partnership grows.

The first workshop focused on the pastors' ministries of pastoral care, while the second workshop concentrated on the challenge of responding to the grief and trauma of ministers, congregation members and the community.

John Bottomley

Chairperson

Sri Lanka Partnership Project Committee

Director

Creative Ministries Network

March 2010

Pastoral care

Pastors from the Jaffna peninsula attended this workshop.

Primary pastoral concerns

The workshop participants meditated in silence on their primary pastoral care concern, and then pastors spoke in turn of their concerns. Almost all of their concerns centred on the needs of children and young people affected by the civil war and/or being displaced from their homes into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps established by the government and controlled by the army.

- *Internally displaced persons, and especially their children. How can we help to ensure they continue their education? For example, one family was in a bunker when a shell exploded, killing the child's mother and brother. They died on the spot. The father lost his eye-sight, and another brother had a piece of his skull blown away. Then the army separated the father from the children. The girl, who was 14 years of age, remembered her aunt's telephone number, and was able to ring her aunt and tell her aunt which camp she was in. The father was also eventually able to ring his sister, the aunt, and they were eventually reunited and then resettled, but not where they lived. The girl needs a place to stay so she can resume her studies.*
- *For a child to transfer from one school to another, they have to produce their birth certificate, and a certificate of transfer from their previous school. Without this paper work, they cannot be readmitted to a new school, but the children have lost all their papers because of the war. The schools are not sure how to intake the students, and how to incorporate them into the school program because it is the last term of the year.*
- *Some children have lost hands and/or limbs from exploding shells, but the new prosthetics don't fit the children because the amputations were done in such poor conditions that they are not done well enough for the prosthetics to work, or even be fitted. This is also a problem for adults who have lost limbs.*
- *A second year medical student committed suicide because she could not bear the stress of not knowing what had happened to her parents in the IDP camps. There was no counselling for students like her.*
- *Students who have been released from IDP camps and are returning to schools and university are faced with the difficulty of returning to study while traumatised from the war and being in the camps.*
- *There are more and more 'mushroom' churches coming up which have grown quickly. They have a charismatic worship that seems to attract people. Perhaps our church is losing its spiritual life if people don't come readily to us. The problem we face is that people come to church to receive money, because they are in a desperate financial situation.*

How it feels to bear these pastoral concerns

The participants then took two minutes for quiet meditation to reflect on how they felt about the pastoral concerns they had shared together. The aim was to move our reflection further into the heart from the mind's recalling of stories to the feeling for each pastor that was at the heart of the matter for them. This is what they said:

- *My mind is too crowded with so many things for one feeling to emerge.*
- *I can't come to quiet, and I am thinking, 'is this my work?'*
- *My heart is in chaos.*
- *When ten people come for money, how do I know who really needs it, and who needs it most?*
- *I have a lot of pressure on my mind.*
- *In the silence, I found some new thoughts for my work.*
- *They are not being honest. They are actors.*

I offered the following observations on the pastors' feelings for their further reflection:

Embodying the chaos of their people

The fact that pastors feel chaotic and have minds too crowded with racing thoughts may show how much they have become incarnate in the lives of their people, who they have also described as having lives in chaos. That is, the pastors have so identified with their people and their struggles that they share the confusion and chaos the people are experiencing.

In Jesus, God became incarnate in human flesh, and shared our very humanity through his life, his passion and suffering and his death. I suggest the pastors are being faithful to Christ's call to be in the world of human struggle when they share the destiny of their people so strongly.

Feeling overwhelmed is normal in overwhelming circumstances

It is quite normal to feel such chaos and disturbed thinking in the midst of trauma. We can see this by the strong level of common experience being reported by the pastors. The experience of feeling overwhelmed emotionally and unable to think clearly is common to these ministers, because our bodies' senses read the world for us first, before our minds. The world their senses read both accurately and painfully is a world of chaos. Our minds simply can't make sense of all the ways our bodies are feeling. While this can be intensely painful and distressing, it is a normal human response to war and violence and innocent suffering. Remember Jesus' intense questions and struggle with his destiny in Luke's account of Christ's passion in the Garden of Gethsemane.

A problem that arises when the mind refuses to listen to the body's experience of chaos and pain

A problem can develop for pastors when we try to pretend to ourselves we are not feeling any pain and chaos when we are exposed so constantly to the pain and chaos in other's lives. What seems to happen is our mind puts up a protective barrier to shut away the felt pain from our mind's awareness because our mind cannot make sense of the chaos and pain. But what the mind shuts out so it is not overwhelmed is also shut in, deep inside our body. The pain becomes buried in our

hearts and souls in a dark place where it may start to poison our heart and soul, leaving us feeling bitter, and hateful.

Western men and our fragmented selves: the need for prayer

In western culture, men are often encouraged to see this way of coping with chaos and pain as a virtue, and there is a lot of expectation on men to be tough ('macho') and able to cope with any circumstance. In my own ministry in a country at peace, I have learned this is impossible. So I imagine that if I try to live up to that image in a war zone, I will again surely fail. It is almost impossible to keep your loved-one's safe from harm, or even to keep one's self safe. Failure and guilt then become even heavier burdens, and I lose touch with the weakness and vulnerability at the core of my God-given humanity. I feel fragmented because my body cannot do what my mind expects of me – I am not strong enough to stop harm happening to my family or congregation, or community, or even to myself.

In prayer, I ask God to accept me when I cannot live up to the ideal image of a 'strong man' or a 'tough man'. I ask God in my meditation how God sees me when I do not like how I see my self. The voice I hear in my prayer always reassures me of God's unconditional love – and this is sufficient for my need, and sufficient for the day.

God can save us from fooling our selves when we shut away the inner movements and feelings in our hearts and souls, for God will accept us even when we feel we have been a failure. How you feel is not the final measure of how God sees you and loves you, even as you are.

A reading from Isaiah 53

The pastors discussed these thoughts, then listened to a reading from Isaiah 53. This was followed by a two minute meditation, where each person reflected upon the phrase or sentence that spoke most strongly to them from the conversation we had shared to this point. This is what they said:

- V. 3 – *We have not taught our people about Christ's suffering.*
- V. 12 – *We have the gift of Christ's soul.*
- Vv. 11 & 12 – *This world is a suffering world and we have to go through it.*
- V. 2 – *We have a ministry of emptying ourselves. There is no beauty in this.*
- Vv. 4 & 5 – *Christ is suffering on our behalf, and we are to follow his example.*
- V. 7 – *Christ was oppressed and led as a lamb to the slaughter. In our ministry, we too should keep silent in the face of accusations, and let the Bishop and the hierarchy speak for us and the Church.*
- V. 4 – *Truly, he bore our sins.*
- V. 3 – *The suffering servant was rejected by men. This is the norm of our ministry. We too will be downtrodden.*
- V. 5 – *Are we ready to accept this suffering? Is it too much for us to bear? If we are ready to accept our suffering, our ministry will be more effective.*
- V. 6 – *We have made God sinful.*
- Vv. 5 & 6 – *No man is perfect. It is only by the grace of God that we are made whole. Are we once and for all cured by God's grace, or do we crucify him again and again?*
- V. 5 – *We have been healed by God's grace.*

I offered the following reflections on the pastors' meditations.

God's Word is comfort and peace in troubled times

I observed a different spirit in our midst after these reflections had been shared. The discussion about the pastoral care needs and the pastor's individual feelings had generated a different feeling from those evoked by the pastors' sharing on the Isaiah passage. While the first part was marked by stress, confusion and a sense of being overwhelmed, the sharing after the meditation was carried by a quiet conviction and the awareness of God's word in our midst. This reminds us that pastoral care needs to be solidly grounded in Christ's calling and his example. In Christ, the suffering servant comes to us in our weakness and despair, and we receive the profound strength and purpose of God's grace, sufficient for the day. The pastors' meditation on Isaiah 53 brought to their attention Christ's presence as the One who shared their suffering.

Suffering shared with the suffering servant is the path to solidarity of faith and witness in and by the Church

Next, I noted the diversity of the pastor's meditations, and how together, they had drawn from almost every verse in Isaiah chapter 53. Perhaps this shows us that we each have individual gifts and an individual service to offer Christ according to our context and our experience. At the same time, there is also a corporate identity that is far richer than the individual parts simply added together. The wholeness of the witness that emerged from the shared meditations, then the pastors' acknowledgment of their shared suffering, is a symbol of what it means to be the body of Christ, the Church.

The Church, politics and the power of suffering love

In our discussion on these thoughts, a question was asked whether the pastors should be involved in politics to help their people. In response, I first drew attention to the fact that Jesus had died at the hands of the Roman government – the political power of the day. Second, the passion and death of Christ as we had reminded ourselves in discussing the suffering servant, shows God's power is greatest in the midst of human powerlessness. This is what Paul teaches in many places, including Ephesians. God identified with our human suffering and experience of oppression when God emptied himself of God's glory and power to become human with us in Christ. In Christ, God reveals the power of love as a far more healing and life-giving power than political power.

If you enter politics, the most you can change is the government, but if you are joined with Christ you are joined in God's redemptive purpose for a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth. Today, I believe we need a new heaven and a new earth more than we need a new government.

The path ahead

The pastors had a final two minutes of meditation to reflect on what they would take away with them from this conversation. This is what they said:

- God will give us power to sustain us in our suffering.
- Jesus is the model for our suffering.
- We serve our people through these sufferings.

- We have the model of Jesus in front of us, and the needs of others in front of us.
- Through prayer and meditation, we can expect strength from God to sustain our ministry.
- There is a challenge to be accepted, and lived in truth and responsibility, then God will look after us.
- We are to seek the kingdom of God's truth, and all will be given to us.
- Our thoughts are not his thoughts. We can trust God to look after us and show us the way.
- We are to follow the suffering servant.
- Christ is full of suffering in his example to us of a servant. He leads us on living a godly life, and living in the world with real joy.
- We are to prepare our minds for this ministry. If we fear suffering, we will not be able to do it.
- God's grace is given freely and strengthens us to welcome suffering and receive a fruitful ministry.

A light to the nations

The context of national events in Sri Lanka gives the teaching about the suffering servant a powerful importance for the pastors. Each of them have identified with the path of suffering before them and JDCSI at this time, and then turned to Christ and the promise of God's kingdom on earth to sustain their ministries in the most difficult of circumstances.

This is the testimony of faithful leaders in JDCSI, and a depth of faith and commitment to the path of Christ's cross I have not seen in my own country. I am drawn to this witness with humble thanks, and am grateful for the opportunity to be in partnership with this Diocese and its ministers.

Grief and trauma

Pastors from the east and west coasts, and south of Elephant's Pass attended this workshop.

Primary experiences of ministry with grief and trauma

The program began with a silent reflection on experiences of grief and trauma they had experienced, and one they would be willing to share with the others. This is what they said:

Personal experiences of grief and trauma

- *My wife and son died in the tsunami. I was looking after a parish already affected by war, and we had political refugees. One family lost three children in the tsunami, and there was terrible wailing and crying. My family wanted me to come back to Jaffna, but who would look after my parish if I leave? I had the same loss as them, and I could relate to them. I told my Bishop I would not leave because I would be in tension if I left. In staying, the comfort was mutual. There was no help for ten days because the roads were washed away. The tsunami was on 26th December, and we had an important service to welcome the New Year. I was there for them and it was a great experience. This tsunami was a landmark event in my ministry. I have been moving with the refugees since the war. The tsunami was different. There were many decomposing bodies, including some in the church. We were not prepared for this, but we attended to the things we could. Some of the things are too difficult to explain in words.*
- *I came to the ministry in 1988 when the Indian peacekeeping force was in operation. I was coming from Colombo to Jaffna through an IPK area, when one of the liberation groups abducted me with sixty others for giving 'false training'. I went on my knees and prayed. Normally they didn't let their hostages free. Two who tried to escape were shot and killed, and everybody saw it. The Bishop went and spoke to the leader of the abduction group, and took a strong stand with this man. The Bishop said I was like a son to him, and this was why he spoke strongly. The man became anxious, and let me go. Soon after I decided to become a pastor. Some of these experiences I cannot put into words, but they help me in my ministry.*
- *I was an orthodox Hindu priest in my community, living in the west, and I was secretary of the local Hindu association. I helped build a school for Hindu children from my own funds to teach them the ethics and philosophy of the Hindu religion. I did this in opposition to Christianity because I couldn't bear to see Christians. I was married in a Hindu temple. I used to block the road for visiting evangelists. A pastor came to live in the area, and I was so angry I bought kerosene and matches, and set the pastor's house on fire. I wore special slippers that fell off when I ran away, so people knew I had lit the fire. I fled to India and was in a refugee camp. I went to a visiting evangelist's rally because I thought there would be fun and games. The preacher called out my name, and mentioned the arson attack and called me forward. Although I wanted to leave, I joined the queue to the platform, and when the evangelist prayed for me, I fell on the ground unconscious. It was then that I gave my*

life to the Lord. In 2004 with my family, I removed the temple shrine from my land, and replaced it with a chapel. Forty Hindus were baptised, and a Hindu group later beat me up, but I stayed.

- My wife's sister died in the tsunami, and I carried her body. My wife didn't want any sadness around her, so I had to hide my depression from her. Another time the Navy was being attacked by the LTTE in Galle. It was like a second tsunami. People were running here and there. All public transport was stopped. I am a Tamil who speaks Singhalese, and a mob of Singhalese people formed to attack Tamils. My congregation warned me not to go out, but I had to get my daughter from school. I collected her, and on my return there were people everywhere with clubs. Somehow I survived. At this time I joined CSI. It is a problem that it is called 'Jaffna Diocese' because it would help me if I could look more Singhalese. I haven't told my wife this. God has changed everything in my life, and given me the ministry. My senior pastor has been a shield and strength.

The grief and trauma of the community

- In the western province, 80 per cent of the population are Buddhists. Although the church is close to the sea, it was not affected by the tsunami, but neighbouring churches were. The church grew from 25 to 60 families after the tsunami. We have now come under CSI.
- When the war came in 1994, my daughter was one month old. We were in a war bunker, and praying all the time. I thought I would die, but by God's grace, we were saved. The shelling killed one man in our bunker. Another experience was in an LTTE-controlled forest area. My husband had a motorbike, which was used as an ambulance, but we needed their army's permission to take a sick person to hospital on his motorbike.
- In 2000 in the eastern province, the LTTE were fighting the army, and people were displaced. Some were killed in their flight. One woman arrived with her husband and three children killed in the attacks. She was inconsolable. I could not do anything. I was having nightmares about what to speak. What should we do in such a situation? This was a continuous challenge to us. One consolation for her was finding that others had a similar loss. Normally we say 'I will pray for you'. But it is not satisfactory in this circumstance. We cannot console them. I feel guilty about my inadequacy. This is my nightmare today.
- In 1996 in the Vanni district we experienced one of the worst periods in this war. People had 'converted' to join the LTTE. I conducted a funeral service for one of these people who had been shot dead. He had been forced to fight. My nightmare was what to say in the eulogy. The Bishop was a neighbouring priest at that time, and I went to him for advice, and he counselled me about what I may say. After this incident, another LTTE man was shot. This time I went to the Bishop and asked him to take the service. There was continuous shelling, so I sent my wife and daughter to the east, and I stayed there. After another LTTE man who was forced to be a fighter was shot it was the third time I had that nightmare.

- *The 1995 exodus to Vanni was my first parish, and there were many refugees on the road. What could I do? Traditional comfort was not enough. I asked what my responsibility to the Church was. This is my major problem.*
- *Sri Lanka has rich farming land. There were seven IDP camps, and at first refugees were brought to school areas. At the beginning, there was no problem communicating with them, and the army respected our cassocks. The first task was to link them to their relatives in other parts of the country. The church could support a few of them with clothes we collected. Then I moved into the main camps, and they were surrounded with barbed-wire fences, and there was more bureaucracy. It became more difficult to contact the IDPs. Things happened in the camps that are in conflict with our culture and traditions, such as having 4/5 families squeezed into one tent. Sanitation was terrible. There was 30 – 40,000 in one camp. If a person fell ill, they had to wait for the doctor in the camp to treat them. The Brigadier had to give permission for them to go to hospital, so some died from illnesses, mainly children and elderly. A Member of Parliament was one of the people in a camp. A lot of things haven't come out - there have been suicides, harassment, and molestation. Some are being kept because they are LTTE suspects.*

How it feels to bear this grief and trauma

At the end of these accounts, I asked the pastors to reflect quietly on how they were feeling as they told and listened to each other's ministries with grief and trauma. This is what they said.

- It is difficult to put my feelings into words.
- Every minister is facing these problems.
- Man does not live by bread alone, but by our love for one another. The love we have been given by God can help us to be supportive.
- I think the next person has suffered more than me.
- The love of Jesus energises me. Our task is to build the nation.
- I am reminded of how God has come to my help, and I chew this cud, and am grateful.
- Our social work is vital.
- I am a soldier for Christ, for peace and with courage.
- I have a nightmare about what is happening to IDPs, especially where LTTE suspects are being held. This is affecting my thoughts, and shatters my heart. I grieve for the LTTE women soldiers, and for their future.
- We need to prepare ourselves for the angle of healing.

I offered several reflections on the discussion to this point.

Confusion as God's desire for you to wait on God's word of justice and comfort to set your direction

I understand the difficulty of feeling confused in such times of crisis, and not knowing what to speak. In western society this confusion, especially in men, has been seen as a sign of weakness, and causes many men to feel ashamed about their silence or their confusion. But this feeling is God-given, as are all the feelings we experience in our bodies, and so God does not judge your feelings from the same viewpoint as the

culture. Confusion is a feeling that tells you to wait. If there is a time to speak and a time for silence, when you feel confused can be a time for silence. In the silence of waiting, listen for God's word so that when you act, you act as a co-worker with Christ in God's kingdom of justice and comfort. Taking action because you want to relieve your own feelings of confusion may do harm to others and increase the burden of their grief.

My own practice is to ask God to accept me when I feel such powerlessness, and I feel useless. In God's eyes, how I feel is not the measure of who I am as a child of God. So I am freed to listen more closely to the chaos in my heart, and listen until I can hear the whisper of Christ's desire for justice and comfort in the midst of the many voices.

If it is hard for you to hear Christ in the confusion, then it will be equally hard for the traumatised person to hear anything you say while they are deeply distressed.

Truth telling is God's comfort for people whose security has been shattered.

Another way is to trust your feelings of confusion and to name them to the traumatised person. Perhaps, 'I don't know what to say to you, but I will sit with you if you wish until you would like me to leave'. These words begin with the truth, an important foundation for people whose trust in words and the world has been shattered. The second part of this sentence seeks to empower the traumatised person. You offer them your presence, a silent companionship, and give them a choice about whether you stay or go. You give them a small amount of power over whether they want your presence at a time when every shred of power has been stripped from them by the circumstance.

One time I visited a friend who was dying of cancer, and in his last hours he was in great pain. I asked him if he would like me to sit and pray with him, and he said 'no', so I left him. As his illness robbed him of the power for life, this word 'no' gave him the human dignity that is his as a child of God, the dignity to choose a small step in the journey of his dying.

In Exodus, for the first time in the Scriptures, we learn that God hears the cry of the poor, the slaves in Egypt. Perhaps this is a model for your listening, because until a poor person believes you have understood how hopeless they feel, they will not trust you to walk alongside them in the journey of healing from their grief and trauma.

Remembrance

The second point I make is about the importance of remembering for the healing journey. Christ teaches us to remember his passion so we will enter into his resurrection life. When you remember also Christ's goodness to you in the past, you may find the consolation of your gratitude for past mercies fill your heart, and strengthen you.

A reading from Luke 24: 13 - 35

The pastors then listened to a reading from Luke 24: 13 – 35, then meditated on the reading in silence. They then shared their reflections.

- *Jesus was with them, but in their sadness, they didn't see him.*

- *The importance of being spiritually grounded.*
- *We feel Jesus' presence in the breaking of bread.*
- *Is not your heart burning?*
- *Christ is with us, but we don't see him. We see him when we are united and share in common.*
- *We are to have the same attitude of Christ to go through suffering.*
- *The disciples were sad because they believed Jesus was dead, and when he spoke of the scriptures, they still couldn't see him although their hearts were inflamed. Then he shared bread with them and they saw him.*
- *Unless we go through the passion of Christ, we will not experience the joy of the resurrection.*

I offered the following reflection on the pastors' meditations.

Christ is present in our grief, even when we are blinded by our grief

I reminded the pastors that as priests living with grief and trauma, they too, like the disciples, may be blind with grief. This blindness may be part of our struggle to be aware of Christ's presence in the midst of violence and death, and shows that Jesus comes to us as his disciples to open our hearts and minds and teach us of the way ahead. Your confusion may be the way that Christ is speaking to you in opposition to the voices of the world.

One important insight for me is that Christ is there with the disciples for the journey of their grief and the trauma of their loss, until they finally can see his presence and their hearts are renewed in hope and joy. You are called as disciples of Christ to be as steadfast in journeying with those who are overwhelmed with grief and trauma as Christ has been with you in your journey through the darkness of grief and trauma.

Christ's presence revealed in broken bread and the sharing of his broken body

A second insight is the importance of the Eucharist for healing ministry. As priests we are not social workers or psychologists, and while we learn from these studies, the church gives us a responsibility to celebrate God's love as the spirit essential for healing, justice and reconciliation. This celebration takes place at our Lord's Table as we remember how he comes again to us through broken bread to be in solidarity with our suffering through his own broken body and poured out blood.

As the pastors centred their concerns for those affected by grief and trauma around the truth of this scripture's promise, I sensed their thanksgiving to God for the graces they have received in their lives and ministries, and their profound commitment to walk in solidarity with Christ and this war-torn nation.

Conclusion

If the voice of the Tamil Tigers had been the political hope of the Tamil community from the time the LTTE imposed their will on the community, the workshops with the JDCSI pastors renewed and strengthened their hope in the voice of God. The meditation of both groups on Christ's presence in scripture evoked a profound recognition of God's Word of comfort and peace in their midst.

God's voice spoke to their hearts in ways that empowered the pastors' own voices. Many spoke with a deep conviction that Christ, who had called them to ministry, was with them as companion and friend. The loneliness, fear and sorrow imposed upon them by years of violence and trauma was met with the quiet assurance of God's grace.

God's voice spoken into the midst of our gathering brought a unity of spirit and solidarity, but at the same time a diversity of insight and wisdom for the challenges ahead. Perhaps this is JDCSI's unique gift to the Tamil community and the Sri Lankan nation. The Church is an alternative community to the politics of the world when it lives out the unity that is the fruit of Christ's embrace. For the gift of Christ's love is deep respect for the human dignity of each person. This respect is to include those who may have harmed them or their people. This is the path I believe these pastors and their Bishop know they are called to follow.

It is a path that they know is also marked with suffering and fear. How do you remember those who have died in war, when the war has divided the country, and destroyed people's trust and sense of safety? The very prayer of remembrance becomes a political act because the person being remembered will inevitably be associated with one army or the other, or will be the innocent victim of one side's violence or the other side's violence.

And how do you provide comfort and relief to the countless thousands who have fled their homes, or been displaced by the violence of war? How do pastors, congregations and Church-run schools, hospitals and hostels decide whom to help? No matter what material resources the Church had at its disposal, it would not be enough to meet the sea of unmet need.

These are only some of the agonising questions that can overwhelm pastors, leading to confusion, stress, and despair. From the comfort of my desk in Melbourne, Australia, I can only say how the integrity and truthfulness of these questions still hold a special place in my heart. I continue to pray for the pastors and Bishop of JDCSI because I hear Christ's anguished voice in their struggle. In Christ's anguished question as to why God had forsaken him on the cross, I hear God's promise to listen to the depth of all who struggle with the questions that exhaust our human capacities. I am inspired by these pastors' faithfulness as they too lament before God the inexpressible grief of their yearning for God's intention for their people and their nation to be made known.