

“A Family for All”

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Mark 10:28-31 = Jesus Community

On the island of Bali on November 11, 1931 a now long forgotten event took place. In a river near Dalung village 12 Hindus were baptized, one woman and eleven men.



Don't go looking for this in any history books. This is a wholly obscure story. I know what you're thinking: "What could this possibly have to do with me?" Think again. Jesus spoke of precisely this in our Gospel text today.

These were the first Balinese Hindus to become followers of Jesus. It took 19 centuries of Christian evangelism for the community of Jesus to finally enter the closed Balinese society. Still that doesn't seem too momentous to our minds.

The immediate consequences for these 12 Balinese first disciples were dire. Jesus' words were fulfilled. They lost everything. With rather flat emotion Wikipedia records:

"the Christian converts had their rice fields sabotaged and they were expelled from their villages."¹



How devastating for those first Christians. As Jesus had anticipated 19 centuries before, they lost homes, fields, families and more ~ all for the sake of the Gospel. Having turned from the Hindu gods, they were made to be non-persons. Banished as heretics, they were forced to flee.

Jesus' words are just as true for us today as they ever were for all new Christians. From our text today:

“Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house[hold] or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for

my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age ~ house[hold]s, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions ~ and in the age to come eternal life.”²

The fellowship of people of the Way is a new kind of family. That makes all the difference.

Those first Christians in Bali had been baptized in the sacred Yeh Poh river. They were banished to the place furthest away from the sacred water sources of the Hindu holy mountain, to the Western tip of the island, the end of their world, where the land was the driest, most infertile, the wildest part of the island. It was a place where death and disease reigned. Among the locals, it was believed a place dominated by demons. They were allowed to settle there because it was considered a death sentence.



The situation in which they were forced was unbearable, but the new community in Christ bore them through it. They opened a village out of the unforgiving forest. They named it Blimbingsari. The town was laid out as a cross. The center of village life was the church. They worked hard, prayed morning and night. They were completely dependent on God's grace. They not only survived, but somehow by God's grace they thrived. The community grew.



In just two years the people of the Way in Bali were recorded to have grown to 266 men with women besides. There was something in this newfound faith which drew others into this community of faith ~ hard to believe but true.



The story of the first Christians in Bali is just as much the story of 1st Century Christians, both Jew and Gentile. It has been and is repeated in nation after nation, place after place. It is the story of all our forbearers, the pioneers of our faith. It's the story of what happens when persons turn from bowing before lifeless statues to worshipping the one

true, living God. It's the story of our faith. It's our story ~ even if easily forgotten.

New converts lose everything. They were killed, or exiled and pushed to the land considered demon-ridden and dangerous. Then these same persecuted believers subdued the sacred groves in Ireland and Scotland, cut down Thor's oak in Germany, vanquished the demon jungle in Thailand and built Chang Mai. They made it safe for us to live our faith in comfort.



Every one of those first Christians in Bali faced the same consequences Jesus predicted; the same as the first Palestinian followers of Jesus; the same as the first Greek Christians, Irish Christians, German, Thai, Chinese, and many more.

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Every one of those first Balinese Christians lost families, homes, property and a place in society. Yet fleeing to Blimbingsari, they left an old, traditional community and they entered a new and different community like nothing they had ever experienced.

What they gained was a new family, a much larger family, a different kind of family, a faith-based family, a compassion-filled family; a family of grace, peace and justice; welcomed with open arms, a family for all.

The fellowship of people of the Way is a family for all. Or it should be. Sadly not all are. Every congregation thinks of itself as welcoming, but if we are honest, most congregations are actually exclusive in their manner of living, worship, ministry and outreach. The bond is less spiritual and much more sociolinguistic and economic similarity. There are a few truly inclusive churches.



This is our own story as well. Something buried but always there: the deep hunger of the soul for authentic community, one we can only dream of, a new family, God's family, a family for all.

Following Jesus involves exponentially more gains than losses. The cost of discipleship has always been high for many if not most Christians

throughout history. We can be forgiven if we overlook the cost of discipleship for ourselves, since our lives and faith are relatively cost-free. Yet, even for us, the spiritual rewards still outweigh the material losses.

That final part of Jesus' words about eternal life is as near as the cover of *Newsweek* some years ago where the headline reads: "Heaven is Real." The lead article was by a neurosurgeon, a former skeptic and afterlife denier, who after coming out of being brain-dead for 7 days became absolutely sure there is an afterlife and a soul.³ Many other books describe these out-of-body experiences and a tunnel of light.



Now researchers have been studying near death experiences for half a century and certain patterns have begun to appear. There is great variation from culture to culture in the content of these experiences ~ Asian's for example never describe a tunnel of light or one's life passing before one's eyes. While there is this great variation, one image is almost universal in all versions of these near death, out-of-body experiences. That common image is simply: family. There is a universal theme of reuniting with family ~ a family restored ~ a family for all.

Gillian Welch has captured this sense beautifully in her song "Orphan Girl." The last two verses of which are:

But when he calls me, I will be able
To meet my family, at God's table
I'll meet my mother, my father, my sister, my brother
No more an orphan girl

Blessed savior, make me willing
And walk beside me, until I'm with them
Be my mother, my father, my sister, my brother
No more an orphan girl

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Indonesia#Bali

² Mark 10:29-30

³ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/10/07/proof-of-heaven-a-doctor-s-experience-with-the-afterlife.html>