



# DISCIPLESHIP SUFFERING & JUSTICE

## MISSION IN A PERMACRISIS WORLD

**What we can learn from a Majority World perspective in light of the challenges we face today.**

**By Israel Oluwale Olofinjana**

**R**ecent years have seen a global pandemic, war in Ukraine, a global economic crisis and the Hamas/Israel tensions reach tragic proportions. Words such as permacrisis and pan-crisis have emerged to describe the multi-crisis we are facing. It could be argued we are living through a paradigm shift redefining and reconfiguring our existential reality.

Not surprisingly this new season of continuous crisis is characterised with

fragility, fragmentation, loss of community, loss of jobs, increased mental health problems, heightened anxiety, fear, depression and poverty.

This means lots of people around the world continue to face suffering unparalleled in our lifetime. How can the Church in Britain respond to this global suffering? What impact does this context of suffering, loss and fragility have on our discipleship and mission?

### **Discipleship rooted in weakness**

One of the shifts ushered in during the pandemic that has stayed with us is a greater consciousness on justice

issues, such as climate justice, immigration justice and racial justice. We saw, for instance, that while the virus affected everyone, it had a worse impact on poorer people and people of colour.

But as we continue to wrestle with the impact of these realities and live through the aforementioned crises, one thing emerging is that the Western Church will need a new discipleship model: one rooted in weakness and powerlessness in order to be able to engage this new context.

An example of such a discipleship model is that of missionaries coming from poorer countries or so-called developing

countries into the UK. We now have 'missionaries from below', to use Latin American missiologist Samuel Escobar's terminology, who are asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants in our churches. They carry an exposure to suffering, and the suffering experiences of these missionaries is an example we can learn from, because the post-pandemic, permacrisis context demands humility and vulnerability.

Jesus's discipleship model of suffering and sacrifice says if anyone will follow me, they must deny themselves and carry their cross (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Denying ourselves in a consumeristic, materialistic and individualistic society involves a lot of sacrifices. Carrying the cross means we are ready to suffer to the point of death for the sake of God's kingdom. After all, the idea of biblical witnessing has an element of suffering in it because the Greek word *martures* translates as the English word martyrdom or martyr. Our discipleship programmes and events, if not preparing people to understand the idea of suffering and sacrifice, will mean they only follow Jesus temporarily when all is going well.

We can learn from the asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants in our churches. Britain is now a new mission field, with reverse missionaries ministering and sitting in our congregations. Let's pray for these reverse missionaries in our services, and integrate their experiences into our programmes.

## A Jubilee framework to integrate mission and justice

We also need a discipleship model that integrates justice issues, moving away from a model that dichotomises and separates mission from justice. This new context demands that we see justice as mission. A biblical framework that helps connect discipleship with justice issues is the Jubilee concept in the Old Testament (Leviticus 25; cf Luke 4:16–22). This is because the Jubilee framework<sup>1</sup> speaks into covenant community, freedom for slaves, economic equality and climate justice. Theologian CB Samuel states: 'Jubilee was a recovery of identity, especially for the poor. It is not about simply correcting economic problems, which is very important; not even just caring for the poor because they're poor; but it is restoring identity, which is a part of their history and very important for them.'

In essence, the Jubilee framework offers a holistic theological framework that can address the gaps of individualism, privatised faith, and lack of racial justice engagement in western discipleship models. The Jubilee festival in the Old Testament is best understood against the backdrop of the children of Israel coming out of Egyptian enslavement, and the new community of Israel understanding its new identity in a covenant relationship with God. In this covenant relationship, God promises freedom for all humanity (Israel as an example) and creation in the 50th year, which is the year of Jubilee.

## Learnings of World Christianity

So how can we apply this Jubilee theological framework in our churches, mission organisations and theological colleges? I want to apply some learnings of World Christianity, drawn from lessons of intercultural mission through multi-ethnic Christianity and racial justice.

Firstly, in order for our churches, mission agencies and theological colleges to become places where God's intercultural kingdom is expressed, we have to be intentional in our thinking, strategies and action. People often desire and want an intercultural church, college or organisation, but are not prepared to do the hard work that it requires. Have your deacons or trustees intentionally sought to have on the team people of Asian, African or Latin American background? Does your five-year strategy plan intentionally include engaging Majority World Christians? Does your leadership team only have PLUs (People Like Us)?

The early church was intentional in nominating and appointing Grecian Jews when they felt marginalised by the Hebraic Jews. A study of the names of the seven leaders (deacons) selected demonstrates this intentionality (see Acts 6:1-7).

Secondly, we need to create safe spaces in our church streams, mission agencies and theological colleges to have conversations about race and racism. Churches too many times shy away from having these difficult conversations because it makes

<sup>1</sup> [tearfund.org.au/stories/jubilee-in-the-bible](https://tearfund.org.au/stories/jubilee-in-the-bible)





people feel uncomfortable. If we are going to move forward, we need to have these conversations and centre it in our discipleship models. Can our church meetings be dedicated to talk about the issue of race and racism? Do our theological colleges have compulsory modules on Asian Theology, African Theology and Post-colonial theologies? Also, who are the people teaching these? Can our national conferences begin to address some of these issues as the main theme rather than relegating them to a seminar or track focusing on the subject?

Our post-pandemic, permacrisis, apocalyptic context requires vulnerability and suffering in order to engage justice issues. Let us engage scripture afresh to develop new models of discipleship that can enable us to be rooted in weakness and integrate the justice concerns and suffering of today.



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**This article is informed by Israel's book: *Discipleship, Suffering and Racial Justice: Mission in a Pandemic World* (Oxford: Regnum Studies, 2021)**

**Available at regnumbooks: <https://ow.ly/hJt650SCaXa>**

**and adapted from a previous article <https://ow.ly/phAH50SCaUA> (Accessed 27 June 2024)**

**Other suggested resources:**

***Visions of Colour* an anti-racism course from the Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Sam Sharpe Project [baptist.org.uk/voc](http://baptist.org.uk/voc)**

***Healing the Divides* by Jessamin Birdsall and Jason Roach  
A biblical perspective on race and how Christians and churches can advance God's vision for racial unity and justice**