

Tell the World of God's Love

James H. Kroeger, M.M.

Mission means “Telling God’s Story.” This insight lies at the heart of the First Asian Mission Congress to be held in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The entire five-day congress (October 18-22) will focus on the many dimensions of “Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia.”

To be in mission signifies that one has heard the Good News, the “Jesus-story,” reflected deeply on its crucial importance, integrated the message into one’s life, and then passionately desires to tell others, to “tell the world of his love,” to tell God’s love story, that love become incarnate in Jesus. All evangelizers can testify that this story is, from beginning to end, a story of great compassion and mercy, God’s salvation story.

The mission congress will unfold in four thematic segments. First, the story of Jesus in the **Peoples** of Asia will be highlighted (e.g. family, youth, women, migrants). Secondly, the “Jesus-story” in the **Religions** of Asia will be presented (e.g. Buddhism, Islam, traditional religions). Thirdly, the **Cultures** of Asia will be related to Jesus (e.g. indigenous, contemporary, and media “cultures”). Finally, the story of how God’s Son guides the life of the **Church** in Asia will be highlighted (e.g. Asian saints, holiness, Mary). The congress participants will celebrate faith and life in all these pivotal dimensions of the story of Jesus in Asia.

To appreciate why story-telling with faith reflection was chosen as the integrating methodology of the mission congress, one can profitably explore the basic elements of story. In brief, stories tell us who we are; they help us maintain and deepen our identity; they link us together. Stories continually explore the deeper dimensions of our lives, illuminating many aspects of the mystery of our being. Stories possess tremendous power to impact faith and life.

Furthermore, stories help define and sustain individuals, families, communities, and indeed, nations. Stories present a window through which we can view the world, perceiving meaning, gaining insight. Stories capture the human experience, telling of compassion, conversion, forgiveness, grace, joy, mercy, peace, reconciliation, and unity. They probe deeply into the human heart, into the mystery of life, into human relationships with God and others. Particular stories emerging from the soil of Asia can shed light on our common spiritual journey (whether we are Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or Christian); together we are on a mutual spiritual pilgrimage.

Without doubt, people remember stories long after they have forgotten the abstract word. It is little wonder then that Jesus enthralled and challenged his listeners with stories. As master-teacher (*rabbi*) using parables, Jesus constantly proposed stories about new possibilities in our relations with God and all our brothers and sisters. Jesus as storyteller gathered up experiences and anecdotes from daily life; he turned them into windows through which his disciples could take a

peek at the kingdom. He invited people to see life with new eyes, to embrace values different from those that culture normally endorses.

Often when Jesus was asked a somewhat theoretical question, "Who is my neighbor?" he replied with a story like *The Good Samaritan* (Lk. 10:30-37). Jesus tried to get the Pharisees to view God in new ways by telling the story of *The Prodigal Son* (Lk. 15:11-32).

The scriptural passage appearing on the mission congress logo quotes Jesus' words to the possessed man he had cured: "Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you" (Mk. 5:19). Congress participants are expected to bring home to their own communities new insights into the story of Jesus, particularly its Asian dimensions. Missioners have always returned to their homelands, bringing with them vivid and inspiring stories, which could light the flame of mission in young hearts.

Recall that at the Council of Jerusalem, Peter told the story of his encounter with Cornelius. During his visit to Jerusalem, Paul recounted several stories of the way in which the Gentiles received the faith. Francis Xavier wanted to run through European universities, telling the story of his encounter with Asia and its millions of peoples waiting to receive the liberating truth of Christ. Great saints, missionaries, and evangelizers have recognized the truth of the assertion: "You cannot tell people what to do; you can only tell them parables."

As an *Asian* mission assembly, the congress aims at using *Asian* approaches to communicate Christian faith. Perceptively, John Paul II's 1999 apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* notes: "In general, narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms are to be preferred. In fact, the proclamation of Jesus Christ can most effectively be made by narrating his story, as the Gospels do." The Church "must be open to the new and surprising ways in which the face of Jesus might be presented in Asia" (EA 20).

The pope continues, saying there is a "need to evangelize in a way that appeals to the sensibilities of Asian peoples"; there is "the pressing need of the local Churches in Asia to present the mystery of Christ to their peoples according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking" (EA 20).

"Story-telling in faith" captures the vision and integrating methodology for the mission congress; in more academic language it could be termed "narrative missiology." This approach seeks to communicate, inspire, bring laughter, promote reflection, strengthen faith, elicit mission commitment. The congress aims to provide an opportunity for Asian evangelizers to share their stories and melodies that will, in turn, resonate with the stories and songs of all God's peoples in Asia.