

Missionaries and Death in the 19th Century

Kai Kjær-Hansen

Lessons from History

This day's theme is "Jesus". The missionaries in the 19th century had a strong awareness of their calling. Jesus was "with" them and they were "with" Jesus. Not even death could change that. Indeed, "with Jesus" or "with the Lord" are expressions they often used in connection with death.

When death showed his hideous face, they would pray for the sick, they would weep and grieve and feel the pain. And after the bereavement they would help each other by proclaiming to each other that the person concerned – be it a missionary or a close family member – was now "with Jesus". They point out to their mission board, when a valuable missionary had been taken away from them, that they need reinforcement, but they do not remonstrate with God.

Basilea Schlink's words, "God, I don't understand you but I trust you," are a fitting description of many of the 19th-century Protestant missionaries. Personally I do not like to think of death. Therefore these missionaries challenge me. Here are a few examples – the first of them are from the history of The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM).

In the year 1820 two promising Americans – both born in 1792 and both academically trained – came to the Levant. There were great expectations that they would establish a mission in Jerusalem. Levi Parsons stays briefly in Jerusalem in 1821, where he distributes Bibles. But he dies already on the 10th of February 1822 on a journey that takes him to Alexandria. Not yet 30 years old. Pliny Fisk concentrates his efforts on language studies, and in 1825 he is ready to start working. He is a very good preacher. He dies on the 23rd of October 1825 on a journey to Beirut. 33 years old.

Where is God in all this? What *is* he thinking of! Does God not need someone like Parsons to distribute Bibles in Jerusalem? Does God not need a good preacher with a good knowledge of languages like Fisk? Why, in the first place, did he call them if he only meant them to have so little time to work in? And yet the few American missionary families continue their work, now focused on Beirut.

Mrs Dalton is staying with them. Having buried Dr Dalton in Jerusalem on the 26th of January 1826 Nicolayson takes up residence with the American missionaries. He is soon after, in July, to accompany them to yet another burial. Mrs Dalton's little boy Henry dies, not yet nine months old. In less than six months she has lost her husband and one child. Only George, not yet two years old, is left with her. Henry is laid to rest beside the mortal remains of missionary Fisk in a field close to the missionaries' houses. There is no Protestant graveyard.

In the autumn of 1833 the Nicolaysons are finally able to settle in Jerusalem. In 1828 Nicolayson married Mrs Dalton, and together they now have two children. The political conditions at this time allow Protestant missionaries to settle in Jerusalem. Nicolayson and the Americans agree that in order to work as missionaries in Jerusalem there must be at least two families. The newly arrived American missionary couple Thompson arrive in Jerusalem on the 26th of April 1834. Now – after almost eight years of waiting – has Nicolayson's calling to missionary work in Jerusalem become possible. God finally seems to be waking from his slumbers. But what happens? There are earthquakes, a war breaks out, there is famine and in 1834 an outbreak of plague. Peasants rebel and capture

Jerusalem. Nicolayson's house lies opposite the Citadel where the soldiers have barricaded themselves. The cannon balls are flying low over his house. The rebels enter his house by force and threaten his life. In the end the rebels are driven away, but the plague is not. All in the house are ill. Mrs Thompson, who has just given birth to a child, dies on the 22nd of July 1834. She was only to get three months in Jerusalem. Mr Thompson leaves Jerusalem, and Nicolayson and his sick family are left in Jerusalem. On the 1st of September he writes: "I have been on the confines of eternity; and what a privilege."

But reinforcement was soon to arrive. Two new American missionary families are ready to take over in Jerusalem; they arrive as early as the 1st of November 1834. And in addition to them Erasmus Scott Calman, a Jesus-believing Jew who helped Nicolayson during a previous short visit to Jerusalem and a person that Nicolayson appreciated very much. When he reports that the missionary families Whitting and Dodge, and also Calman, have arrived, he says boldly: "Thus our little band is complete". They have at long last become a team in Jerusalem.

But even that was not to last long. Dr Dodge dies at the end of January 1835. His attachment to the Jerusalem mission was only three months. Calman falls terminally ill, and a planned evangelistic journey has to be cancelled. In his critical situation Calman is taken to Beirut, where he survives.

I now make a leap to 1839. Nicolayson has received an Anglican ordination in England in 1837. He has got a few young Jewish co-workers, and there are some American missionary families in Jerusalem. In April 1839 he baptized the Jewish family Rosenthal. What perseverance! The first results came after more than 13 years' work. What faithfulness to his calling! He can now begin to keep a church register; a small congregation is beginning to grow. In the church register he enters not only baptisms but also deaths. On the 2nd of November 1839 he has to enter his own daughter Jane Dorothy as the first to be put to rest in the American cemetery. Born in 1831, she dies not yet eight years

old. When he comes back home from the burial, he sits down and writes in his diary: "It has pleased our heavenly Father to take our youngest beloved daughter, Jane Dorothy, to himself, almost quite unexpectedly to us." Nicolayson does not doubt that she is now "with the Lord who bought her." Nicolayson then passes on to business matters.

His daughter's death has had an effect on him. *He* might have died. And what would then become of the plot of land he had bought to build a church on. In London they must understand that he needs reinforcement. "So long as I can get a rope to hold to," he writes, "and have a hand to hold it by, I will not leave this vessel in which I have embarked, because I believe the Lord is on board – even though he should seem to be asleep."

In 1840 the Jerusalem mission is now bold enough to start building the church, even though the official permit has not been given. W.C. Hillier, the English architect who is to be in charge of the construction, arrives on the 7th of July 1840. He is instantly taken ill and dies on the 8th of August. One month is all he got in Jerusalem. In 1841 strenuous efforts are made to get a Protestant bishop – the first ever – to Jerusalem, which succeeds. It was to be the Jewish-born Michael Solomon Alexander. What an opportunity! They now have a Jewish Christian congregation with a Jewish Christian bishop as its leader. The Bishop, his family and entourage arrive in Jerusalem on the 21st of January 1842. On the 13th of February, less than a month after their arrival, they have to bury their newborn baby. Alexander dies on a visitation journey on the 16th of November 1845 – less than four years after his arrival in Jerusalem. Before then Mary Ann Ewald, married to the missionary Ferdinand Christian Ewald who had come with Bishop Alexander, had died in January 1844. Ewald was forced to interrupt his work because he had to bring his small children back to England. He returns to Jerusalem.

One could go on like this.

I desist from summarizing and instead let Pliny Fisk have the last words. On his deathbed in 1825 – 33 years old – he

dictates the following short message to his father:

“Dear beloved aged Father, – I compose a few lines for you upon a sick, probably a dying bed. When you gave me up for this mission, you gave me up for life and death. You know to whom to look for consolation and support. The same God who has comforted you so many years, under so many troubles, will comfort you under this. You know his consolations are neither few nor small. I leave these lines as a pledge to you, and my brothers and sisters, my nephews and nieces, that I love you all most dearly, though so long separated from you. I hope all, or nearly all our number, have been enabled to give themselves to Christ, and that we shall meet with our departed mother in heaven.”

Moving words from a 33-year-old man to his old father.

Dr Kai Kjær-Hansen
Chairman of the Danish Israel Mission
International Coordinator of LCJE
lcje-int@post3.tele.dk