This slim volume showcases a dazzling array of missional wisdom and experience and I’m thrilled to be writing the foreword. If nothing else, it’s allowed me a sneak preview of a diverse collection of literary and missiological gems. More than that, however, the range of authors and the themes they address have re-affirmed my sense of call as a missiologist. I repeatedly found myself thinking ‘This is why I do what I do!’

It’s never an easy task to introduce a set of collected works and I was determined from the outset to avoid offering a literary trailer to each of the chapters. In the 2006 romantic comedy The Holiday, the character played by Cameron Diaz directs a company producing voiceovers for Hollywood movie trailers. The comedic aspect is that we, the audience, overhear her imagined trailers, basso profundo, summarising the dramatic moments of her life. In the movie we see her trying to break free of this tendency in order to make real connections with the people around her. Each of the chapters in this collection makes its own highly creative connections to the realities of life faced by their respective authors. I discovered that each, in its own way, was engaging and transforming the way we might otherwise view such realities. In the face of this fact, it was immediately apparent that an attempt on my part to summarise each chapter would result in a dull and lifeless introduction. The colours and melodies of each chapter contribute to an artistic and theological whole that reflects a surprising harmony of purpose and so I’ve set out to try and create a literary impression of what I’ve seen (as well as read) in these chapters.

So, what kind of foreword is this? It might be unusual, but attempting to review the chapters took me back in my memories to the small fishing village in which I grew up. My dad spent a few seasons working the trawlers. I vividly recall the fleet of trawlers making its way back to harbour, trailed by an aerial plume of seagulls eager for the discarded waste. As the gulls touched down on the quayside to form small groups I would run at them, delighted to see them scatter and take to the skies, wheeling and dipping, calling angrily, and waiting their chance to return to the landing site. Seagulls have that tendency. Run at them and they scatter in all directions, with little or no semblance of moving in concert. One of the few occasions when gulls move together is when they collectively trail a fishing boat or passenger ferry, in the expectation of a tasty reward. I’ve also come to realise that gulls will do that for many hours, even days. They have remarkable endurance.

Had I taken a metaphorical run at the chapters in this volume I might have expected them, on first glance, to scatter in all directions. What connections might one possibly draw between, for example, robustly eccentric accounts of the ordo salutis, the built environment, the iWorld, or eco-missiology? It appears that what we have here is a collection of theological seagulls; with little or no likelihood of murmuration (Google™ it!). Or so it might seem.

A more careful reading of the chapters, however, reveals a small number of tightly inter-related themes. What I see here illustrates the missional, incarnational, relational, and ecological concerns that lie at the heart of Mike Frost’s enduring vision for the Tinsley Institute. Together, these help to explain why this Institute is such a stimulating place to work. As with the flock of gulls trailing in the wake of the fishing boat, these concerns motivate endurance in the face of the long haul that is the task of re-purposing missiology for each and every new challenge it encounters. Our authors argue that the Christian faith and its theological traditions provide an adequate and coherent response to the questions posed by the contemporary iWorld; offer resources in the seemingly overwhelming struggle with climate change; require us to bind the wounds of those alienated by the urban environment; provide a framework for interpreting the social spaces in which we live and work; and, ultimately, suggest that in committing to such things we become participants in the creative, salvific, and missional purposes of a triune God, the missio Dei trinitatis.
What strikes me about these authors is the manner in which they are wrestling with realities that resonate deeply for many of us. I too frequently hear students talk about ‘life in the real world’, by which they mean life beyond the campus of Colleges such as Morling. I understand what they are trying to say and sympathise to some extent with their desire to remain rooted in the communities that they are serving in the name of Jesus. I can hardly take issue with them in this regard: identification with the world that we serve is rooted in an incarnational vision of the world.

What I choose to take issue with is the way in which my students too readily assume that what they encounter beyond the campus is ‘real’. What our authors have done here is help us to understand that what is encountered there is frequently a distorted, even obscured, version of what God considers ‘real’. A biblical worldview involves an understanding that God’s version of reality is ‘more real’ than the reality encountered in the mundane affairs of a fallen humanity.

The perceptions of a minister working in the midst of urban deprivation are certainly ‘real’. A student frustrated with a congregation that struggles to kick the habits of Christendom is experiencing something ‘real’. A Pacific islander working hard to keep his home above rising sea-levels is very aware that his problems are ‘real’. These are hardly contestable facts, but despite this, I want to argue that they are not ultimate realities.

That is why our authors not only wrestle with the issues that concern them both personally and professionally, but it also explains why they write in a way that envisions the future that God intends for a restored humanity. What drives these authors to write, I suspect, is a shared conviction that ultimate reality is rooted in the activity and character of a personal, purposive, and goal-oriented God, revealed to us in Jesus the Messiah. Furthermore, that reality is given expression in the conviction that God’s missional purpose is to extend his authority over the whole of the created order. Ultimate reality is glimpsed, and occasionally experienced, with the irruption of God’s coming reign into the world that our authors are writing about and of which they are a part.

I’m left in no doubt by this collection of annual Tinsley lectures that the real world is right at the heart of the concerns of a College like Morling. I wholeheartedly commend them to you.

Darrell Jackson

Feast day of St Desideratus, May 2013

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