



# Emotional depth in the secular city

**Peter Sanlon, who lectures in doctrine and church history at Oak Hill, and who also ministers in Tottenham, reflects on the vital importance of emotional sincerity and depth in ministry and mission.**



Secularism thins life out. Strips it down. The secular city is a melting pot of cultures. Variety and choice bombard, overwhelm and desensitise. Ask somebody how they are – most likely they feel ‘busy’ or ‘tired’. Always connected. Always on. It is overwhelming. Lonely. Destabilising.

Tempting though it is to criticise our secular city for all its failings (and there are many), Christians need to

*Left: Peter Sanlon at work on an estate in Tottenham. He believes that ministry and mission need ‘people who display the basics of emotional depth: empathy, humility and self-awareness.’*

display emotional depth. There is a popular image of Old Testament prophets haranguing pagans. As it happens, they spent far more time critiquing God’s own people. Learning to display emotional depth may involve more of what the Old Testament prophets so frequently did.

Displaying emotional depth is what we do when we are open to relationships with other people. It involves letting others see something of me as a person, rather than just the job title. Difficult though it is to summarise in words, we all know emotional depth when we encounter it. A person able to move a conversation on to the things that matter; sensitive to the other person’s

feelings; interested in the stranger. Desire to control, avoid, use or demean can be communicated in the fraction of a second, during a first encounter. People made in God’s image are sensitive enough to intuit. Desire to relate, empathise, love and know are communicated as instantly.

For at least three reasons it is imperative Christians work at developing emotional depth, while living in the secular city.

Firstly, emotional depth helps us make sense of Jesus. Jesus displayed emotional depth – people from all walks of life felt comfortable approaching him. Children, poor, rich, women and men. His disciples knew they could ask him for help. People saw

him weep at the grave of his friend. Many of his retorts to opponents were surely delivered with a laugh.

As a true human who fully engaged in earthly life, Jesus was emotional. If we are to engage with and make sense of Jesus, we must learn to display emotional depth. Augustine warned, in *City of God*, against those who depreciate emotions: 'If these emotions and feelings, that spring from love of the good and from holy charity, are to be called faults, then let us allow that real faults should be called virtues... human emotion was not illusory in Jesus.'

Secondly, emotional depth makes sense of ministry. Ministry is at its heart helping people to engage with Jesus. This cannot be done solely by proclaiming truths accurately. Neither can it be done if the minister lacks the emotional depth necessary for developing relationships with others.

The apostle Paul is our great example in this area. When the Ephesian elders realised they would never see Paul again, they cried. They did not shrug their shoulders and think, 'No worries – we have his letter.' They would miss him because he had done what he did with every church he planted – shared his life, opened his heart, rejoiced at progress and wept over weaknesses.

As Paul put it to the Thessalonian Christians: 'We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.'

It is a sobering fact that we will all reach a time sooner or later when we will move on from our current ministry roles. When that happens, if none of our colleagues or congregation feel moved to tears, our ministry has been sub-Pauline. Dare we face the possibility that since Paul urged ministers to follow his example, as he followed the 'example of Christ', that a ministry lacking emotional depth is un-Christlike?

Thirdly, emotional depth makes sense of mission in the secular world. One of the most extensive and widely cited research projects on the way secular people perceive Christians makes painful reading. Published as the book *Unchristian*, it repeatedly shows that for many secular people, 'emotional and intellectual barriers go up when around Christians'.

Commenting on the Church's response to research that nine out of ten people think Christians are judgmental, the researchers wrote, 'Many Christians get defensive even talking about the perception of being judgmental. It is a key biblical concept that pointing people to Jesus is not achieved by being popular. Yet an entire generation are questioning our motives as Christians. They believe we are more interested in proving we are right than that God is right.'

If the secular perception of Christianity is anything like close to what this research suggests, emotional depth is not an optional extra for mission. People who are suspicious of

our motives and resentful at our image will not hear our message, unless it is presented by people who display the basics of emotional depth: empathy, humility and self-awareness.

All these virtues were practised supremely by Jesus, who modelled the perfect human life. As we seek to introduce secular people to Jesus, we need to learn how to follow his example. As Jerram Barrs so memorably put it in the title of his seminal (now regrettably often overlooked) book from 1978, our mission needs 'Christianity with a human face'.

I was struck recently by a student's wife sharing with me how her friend's work colleague had disliked Christians, since she intuitively felt they sought to give the impression of being interested in knowing her, but it was always on their terms, and rapidly led to event invitations. Secular people are too suspicious for that approach. It doesn't fit with Jesus, or biblical ministry either.

How different was the experience of a person I shared the gospel with and prayed with as she took the first steps of Christian commitment. We had only known each other half a day. But sitting alongside us as we prayed was the mutual Christian friend who had been a supportive, tireless and kind friend to her for a decade.

The emotional depth that permitted that friendship to occur and last, helped Jesus, ministry and mission to make sense to all of us.