

Three Things I've Learned from John Allen Chau

By Mark Powell

When a twenty-six-year-old missionary, John Allen Chau, was murdered by the people of North Sentinel Island on 17 November 2018, every media organisation in the world seemed to debate the validity of Christian missions. In one sense, it should come as no surprise that the unbelieving world can never understand why someone would lay down their life to tell people about Jesus (i.e. 2 Cor. 4:4).

But what has been surprising—and more than a little disappointing—is how many evangelicals have denounced what Chau had done. Especially as when it comes to witnessing, many of us are so lacking in courage that we hardly ever share the Gospel at all.

In particular, Chau was accused by some of foolishly exposing the Sentinelese to death via deadly diseases while trying to offer them the message of eternal life. Then there were those who questioned whether Chau was adequately trained for such a difficult task. While still others disagreed with taking the Gospel to a place where it was illegal for outsiders to go.

However, it didn't take long for each of these objections to be answered. (See especially the following interview at Christianity Today as well as this excellent response by Tim Challies as well as Denny Burk). For instance, it was precisely because of the numerous health risks associated with his mission that Chau made sure he was thoroughly trained in the medical field. In fact, he had been immunised for thirteen types of different diseases and had also placed himself in quarantine for many days before he made contact with the tribe.

What's more, Dr Ho, the international director of All Nations—the mission's agency that commissioned Chau—said that with

advances in modern medicine outside influence could actually be of great help to the people there.

Dr Ho also revealed that John Chau had been preparing for this particular mission for eight years and that he was one of All Nations top graduates. As such, he was thoroughly prepared in linguistics, cultural anthropology, medicine, missiology and, of course, the Bible.

And finally, while the ethical issues around Chau going to North Sentinel Island are a little vague since travel bans to the area had recently been lifted, when has it ever been right to obey man rather than God in bringing the good news to the world? (See Acts 5:40-42) If our forebears had waited until they had permission to bring the Gospel we would still be living in spiritual darkness.

The life and death of John Allen Chau has raised three critical issues that the evangelical church in the West today needs to address:

First, we need to recover the Gospel imperative for mission. What has become evident, is that many modern evangelicals have lost the theological conviction that the “lost” are truly “lost”. That there is no salvation outside of faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:42; John 14:6; Rom. 10:14-15). Chau obviously had a deep conviction that the people of North Sentinel Island needed to hear the Gospel. However, the attitude of many Christians to the actions of the Sentinelese was that they were better left alone. But that betrays the belief that unbelievers are not under the wrath of God (i.e. Romans 1:18-25). Could this be part of the reason why more Christians, especially in the affluent West, are not committing themselves to overseas missions?

Second, we need to recover a commitment to sacrificial service. One of the last journal entries that John Chau wrote was as follows: "I love you all and I pray none of you love anything in this world more than Jesus Christ." Chau himself had an attitude of complete surrender to the purposes and plans of Christ. In comparison, I was personally left feeling decidedly worldly and even lukewarm (Rev. 3:16). Are we prepared to give up everything for the Kingdom of God?

Third, we need to recover a truly Biblical understanding of the nature of 'calling'. Why is it that so many men in the ministry today are not going the distance? The reasons are many, but could one of them be that we've abandoned any sense of having been called by God? If Christian service is merely a result of one's own decision, then how does that really encourage us to persevere when the going gets tough? John Chau wrote in his journal on the 15th of November:

Last night I had what I'd call a vision, as I've never had one before - my eyes were shut but I wasn't asleep and I saw a purple hue over a ghoulish city, as a meteorite or star fell to it and it was a frightening city with jagged spires. and I felt distressed. Then a different light, a whitish light filled it and all the frightening bits melted away. LORD, is this island Satan's last stronghold where none have heard or even had a chance to hear your name?

LORD, strengthen me as I need your strength and protection and guidance and all that you give and are. Whoever comes after me to take your place, whether it's after tomorrow or another time, please give them a double anointing and bless them mightily.

What is especially striking about what Chau wrote was not just his humility, but his absolute dependence upon the LORD. Why did he go back, especially when he knew that it would mean almost certain death? On one level, it's because he couldn't since the North Sentinelese had stolen his kayak which contained all of his personal possessions, including his U.S. passport. But

ultimately, the reason why he went back was because he was convinced that, that is what he had been called to do. As John Chau wrote in his journal, quoting from Jeremiah 1:5;

God, I thank you for choosing me before I was even first formed in my mother's womb, to be your messenger of your good news to the people of North Sentinel Island. Even my heritage points to you...me an American citizen, part Irish, part Native American, part African, part Chinese and South east Asian.

Thankyou father for using me for shaping me, for moulding me to be your ambassador, please continue to help all of us involved hidden from the physical and spiritual forces who desire to keep the people here in darkness. Holy Spirit please open the eyes of the tribe to receive you and by receiving me, to receive you. May your kingdom, your rule and reign come now to North Sentinel Island. My life is in your hands, O Father, into your hands I commit your spirit.

I don't think I will ever forget the example of John Allen Chau. Many would consider him a fool. And indeed, he was a fool. A fool for Christ in the great tradition of the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 4:10). But Chau's life and death will have a legacy which will last far into eternity (See Daniel 12:3). And what's more, he has challenged me personally in profound and far reaching ways in the here and now.

It has given me a renewed commitment to pray, both for the lost and for the Lord of the harvest to raise up workers to go to them (Matt. 9:37-38).

It has given me a renewed commitment to share the Gospel with those whom I meet. And let's face it, the jungles of a big city can be just as ferocious as any in deepest, darkest Africa.

And it has given me a renewed commitment to go. To lay down my life at the Saviour's feet and to be used in whatever location and whatever way He sees fit.