

SP/PT5/713 (3) The Inner-Urban Apostolate: Suffering, Dignity, & Mutuality on the Streets
Fr. Matthew Johnson and Jason Byassee
Spring 2022 Wednesday mornings 9-11:50 AM
Location: at St. James Anglican and nearby locations

Rationale

The goal of this course is to discover the face of Jesus in an inner-urban parish, the living Christ among sisters and brothers. He is there and alive. They are our mentors, showing us the way of Christ in a marginalized community. To discover the distinctiveness of street facing ministry—what is its shape there—over against more “normal” parochial skills?

Competencies

1-To develop the ability to see and say *what's going on* in the Downtown Eastside. Richard Niebuhr argues that the first question of Christian ethics is not to ask “What should we do?” but rather to ask “What is going on?” What is the complex reality before us, baffling us? Students should leave this course with the ability to narrate well the history, politics, and spirituality of Canada’s poorest neighbourhood.

2-To discern the presence of the risen and living Christ in the DTES. Not a few ministries have faltered on the false belief that they were bringing Jesus somewhere where he was not. Yet the risen Jesus is never absent, and everywhere he is, he is bringing healing, exorcizing demons, teaching good news, and raising the dead. We will develop the skills to see Jesus Christ already at work among his beloved poor and marginalized.

3-To imagine faithfully ministry in your own present and future contexts. Theology and ministry are always matters of analogy-making. No two places are precisely alike. What would ministry to and with and from neighbours and peers on the DTES look like? And how might we offer similar ministry in quite-different contexts in the future?

Assignments

1-Students will keep a regular journal on what they’re discovering about God, themselves, the church, and the world during the semester. Students will share with the professors 1000 words worth of reflection per week, with two weeks in which they may “skip” journaling. These entries should focus on the sensuous: what does the DTES look like, smell like, sound like, even taste like, feel like? These do not have to be fully-formed thoughts, but rather can be more initial-contact impressions (there is time for the more deeply formed thoughts in the final paper).

2-Students will explore a ministry in the DTES that they admire. The course will provide plentiful examples, and Father Matthew knows dozens more and can recommend from among these many. How is this endeavor obeying Jesus’ commands in Matthew 25:31-46 to discern Christ in the “least of these”? Out of what resources in this ministry’s tradition is it working to be an agent of mercy and healing? Write 2000-3000 accessible words on its work—write for lay people, rather than fellow academics (think *Vancouver Sun* more than *Modern Theology*).

3-Listening project: the course will invite several street-involved people into our midst to represent life on the street, to talk about what that life is like and to take questions. We will attend to several poets and storytellers from the DTES—especially among indigenous women. Fr. Matthew’s contacts include many hundreds of friends. Students will design a listening project, in conjunction with professors, to heed firsthand the voices who are our first teachers in this course.

4-A final paper offering a theology of the DTES, drawing on resources from the class (lectures, interviews, fieldtrips, readings) and from outside the class (your own research). The paper should be not less than 5000 words, and you have freedom to pitch it in a more or less academic way. The paper should include some analysis of poverty and marginalization, some reflection on the theological priority of the excluded, and some attention to ministry that enters into common cause with the disadvantaged.

Methodology

The course will be taught on-site at St. James Anglican Church in the DTES, where Father Matthew has his office. We will read and write, as seminary courses ordinarily do. But we will also take field trips, pray, explore the neighbourhood, and by the end we will have a sense of the place, its people, its history and stories. We will workshop “responding to the agitated person,” learning from Father Matthew’s experience in this oft-offered teaching. The Downtown Eastside stands in for “poverty” and “drug abuse” and “danger” in most Vancouverites’ minds. But Jesus’ people know he blesses the poor and is among them in special ways. We who are less materially deprived must go and find him there, among his beloved poor. This course will begin a lifelong pilgrimage of doing that, both in the DTES and far beyond.

The unique nature of this course requires its participants to be physically present in class together. No distance or asynchronous students may enroll.

Because the course deals with painful and difficult issues, students are duly warned that if they are currently dealing with trauma, or with significant unprocessed trauma in their history, they may be triggered by this course, and should not register. This course deals inevitably with disturbing real world matters such as addiction, mental illness, violence, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse, racism, prostitution, street crime, organized crime, bullying, and other distressing matters, all of which will be explored with care, but which could overwhelm some students, who should not register.

Readings

There are no books to buy, though those keen to do so could buy and preread Gabor Mate’s *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* and Bessel Van Der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score*, much of which will be assigned. Readings will be posted on Canvas. The [Aparecida](#) Document and [Evangelii Gaudium](#), both documents of the Roman Catholic Church, will guide our conversations throughout.