BOOT IN MOUTH

Posted on March 31, 2016 by Eddie

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Category: Mission

What could go wrong? A world class footballer wants to make a kind gesture, so he gives a pair of his boots to be auctioned for charity. Let's face it, there is big money to be made from football memorabilia, so this is a win-win situation.

Except it isn't.

> *What Messi seems to have failed to appreciate is that in Egypt and other Arab countries in the region shoes can be used as a symbol of disrespect or insult. So some Egyptians took offence and turned to social media to express their anger. (Read the full story here.)*

Poor old Lionel Messi, he wanted to help people but he ended up offending a whole nation. To be honest, it's hard for us to understand why people got so upset at Messi giving a pair of boots for auction. It was a kind gesture; shouldn't people just get over themselves and appreciate the offer for what was meant?

The thing is, every culture has things that are offensive, but which seem benign to outsiders; be that certain words, particular insults, hand gestures or even shoes.Â Sometimes people can explain why they find certain things offensive and sometimes they can't; these things aren't always logical. However, even though things might seem trivial to outsiders; they may well be highly offensive or insulting to people within the culture - that's the way things are.

So why am I writing about this? Well,Â Â it's no use blundering around, upsetting people left right and centre and then expecting them to listen to you talking about a loving Saviour. It just isn't going to happen. Missionaries need to learn to avoid offending people in the way that Messi did and that takes preparation, time and a lot of humility.

Now, at this point, some people respond by saying that we should offend people, because the Gospel is offensive. Well, that's true, but there is a definite distinction to be drawnÂ between people being offended by the message and being offended by the messenger. Yes, the Gospel is offensive; it calls people to radically change their lives in response to Christ, but that doesn't mean that Christians are free to be insensitive.

We have to avoid behaviours which will stop people listening to us even before we start talking. For example, we Westerners love informality, but in many parts of the world a serious message needs to be delivered seriously. If you have something important to say, you will wear a suit and a tie - even if it is 40C in the shade. Preaching in jeans (or worse; shorts) and a t-shirt is a demonstration that you don't care about your message, so no one else will, either.

We also need to take things a step further and shape our message so that our hearers can understand and respond. For example, it's no use preaching how wonderful it is that God gives us eternal life (Jn 3:16) if you are speaking to a group of Buddhists. They believe they are stuck in an

endless cycle of re-incarnations and eternal life is precisely what they are trying to avoid. There is a lot more ground work that needs to be done before Jn 3:16 has any relevance in those sorts of contexts.

The message we preach has to make sense and has to address the context and worldview of our hearers. Thankfully, the Biblical story is rich enough to be applied in all sorts of situations. Lionel Messi's genuine offer of a pair of boots was taken as an insult, because shoes and feet are considered dirty; just imagine how powerful it is in that context to learn of a saviour who was willing to wash the dirty feet of his disciples. If he can do that, then through his death and resurrection, he can even clean the worst things in our lives.

Thanks to @ChrisHowles for pointing me to the original story.