

18th November 2013 – *Pentecost + 25 [Mission Sunday]*
Is 49:1-6, Ps 67, Eph 2:13-22, Mt 28:16-20
07:30 & 09:30 Grahamstown Cathedral

The words of Jesus from our well known Gospel passage: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...”

As we gather today on Mission Sunday, it may be easy to forget that the ‘great commission’ was novel idea at the time. There wasn't much of what we'd call ‘missionary activity’ in the ancient world – religious practice was largely local and ethnic. What drove those eleven disciples of Jesus out to foreign lands, to share the news in foreign languages? Apparently they were quite sure that what they had to say about Jesus would be equally relevant wherever they went, and whoever they met. The fact that you and I are assembled together here on the Lord’s Day is proof that they were right. Jesus is truly universal, capable of transforming any human relationship, bringing life in any situation and embodying and making visible the purpose and nature of God in any context.

Why is it then, that if a mission trip or evangelism opportunity is mentioned that most Christians dive for cover as quickly as possible? I suspect that many of us find it tempting to hide behind the old dictum popularly attributed to St. Francis: “preach the gospel at all times, use words only when absolutely necessary.” The deep truth in that statement is diluted if it acts merely to comfort our reticence to speak about Jesus. How did you come to faith? Surely someone told you, through speech or writing? Are you a Christian in order to escape the fires of hell or because you found something attractive and compelling in the person of Jesus Christ... what kind of God do you believe in?

The most popular retelling of the gospel in recent times has gone something like this: "God offers everlasting life by grace, freely, through no merit on our part. Unless you do not respond the right way. Then God will torture you forever in hell." A God like this who is loving one moment and a cruel tyrant the next is not the kind of God who would inspire my trust... quite the opposite in fact. And no amount of clever marketing, beautiful music or even good coffee would be able to disguise this. It is imperative that we challenge guilt motivated conversions based on this understanding of God.

Conversion is not simply about acquiring a new set of beliefs, which act as a ticket into heaven. Conversion is about becoming a new person, a person in communion with God and others. This type of conversion is on-going and requires contemplation. If we are to help those around us to discover the attractive and compelling nature of the gospel we shall have to learn the language of God... silence. Thomas Merton says that "contemplation is essentially a listening in silence." As the prophet Elijah discovered in his cave on the mountain, God is not in the wind or the earthquake, or in the fire but in the silence of the gentle breeze.

Our busy-ness obsessed society leaves us feeling obliged to be productive all the time and guilty if we are not working. Christians seeking to be involved in the mission of God have often, too easily, adopted the world's way of busy-ness. Do we really think that hard work and tireless activism is all that is needed to save the world, to carry out the mission of God? In truth, busy-ness is the supreme distraction. We must set aside time to be contemplative... and even when we do set aside time to be quiet, the sheer volume of our distracting thoughts can be like a hurricane.

The first Christian hermits in Egypt and Syria, went off into the desert, as Jesus had done, in search of God. For them the first step was silence of the heart. They did this mostly through the repetition of what has come to be known as the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." The repetition of the Jesus prayer helped these hermits to still their distracting thoughts and allowed them to truly listen to God. My experience is that contemplation does not result in instant 'success', but if we set aside 20mins each day the result is not unlike the effect water has on rock over a long period of time... we are transformed and become more like the one we listen to.

Rowan Williams recently spoke to a gathering of Catholic Bishops about the importance of contemplation in evangelism, he said: “To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.”

Any encounter with God is always a revolutionary matter, precisely because a glimpse of God staggers our imagination. This is what we attempt to do with all of our lives, but most notably when we gather together on a Sunday to worship corporately. Most modern Christians think of singing songs and worship as interchangeable words. The finest definition of worship that I am aware of was penned by Archbishop William Temple, he said: “Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His Beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose – and all of this gathered up in adoration, [*is the greatest offering we are capable of*].”

That is why the greatest evangel is a worshipping church. A community whose worship runs deep will encounter the God of mission who has a church. A community whose worship is shallow will too easily think that the Church of God has a mission. That may sound like I’m just playing with words... I’m not! To recognize that we the church serve the God mission is a fundamental shift from understanding that the church of God has a mission. The latter approach views mission as yet another task for us to do, whereas the former approach understands that mission is part of our very essence.

John Prichard, the Bishop of Oxford writes in his book 'The Life and Work of a Priest': "My fantasy is that somewhere in the world is a church that's so attractive it's irresistible. Then I want to put its DNA into a petri dish, reproduce it and give it to every gathering of God's people throughout the world. Sadly, I don't think such a church exists because every church is made up of imperfect human beings; but I remain convinced that this is the goal, because the most effective form of evangelism is a community living out the gospel so fully and attractively that people are drawn into its orbit and so discover Christ."

Is this all true? Will a commitment to the contemplative life and regular corporate worship really advance the mission of God? You may have seen Bishop Ebenezer's comments about the potential scrapping of Christmas and Easter as public holidays. Among other things the Bishop articulated how these Christian feasts help to eradicate corruption and evil in our country by helping us to celebrate God and humanity. On the same day that I read this piece in the Grocotts I received an email from Br. Josias whom many of you know from the Monastery.

He sent me information of a horrific news story. Six teenagers were arrested on Thursday for the murders of three children in Limpopo in August. The police indicated that the six were aged between 12 and 14, and would face three charges of murder, and rape. Brothers Bafana Kekana, nine, and Hosea Richard Kekana, 10, and their cousin Johana Kekana, 12, were found dead in Mookgopong (formerly Naboomspruit) on the 18th August. They had been stoned to death. Bloodied stones, covered by a blanket and tree branches, were found near their bodies. The girl, Johana, had been raped before being killed.

What would have happened if those six murderous teenagers had attended an Easter service earlier this year? It is unlikely that a once off attendance at a service would transform a teenager capable of rape and murder... though for God all things are possible. But what if the parents of these teenagers were regular worshippers? What if those teenagers had been drawn into the community of faith from a young age and experienced the love of God through many and various members of the church? Had this been the case, their lives may very well have been different.

In conclusion, I leave us with the words of Rowan Williams: “Do we look anxiously to the problems of our day, the varieties of unfaithfulness or of threat to faith and morals, the weakness of the institution? Or are we seeking to look to Jesus, to the unveiled face of God’s image in the light of which we see the image further reflected in ourselves and our neighbours?”

That simply reminds us that evangelisation is always an overflow of something else – the disciple’s journey to maturity in Christ, a journey not organised by the ambitious ego but the result of the prompting and drawing of the Spirit in us. In our considerations of how we are once again to make the Gospel of Christ compellingly attractive to men and women of our age, I hope we never lose sight of what makes it compelling to ourselves...”