

FROM FEAR TO WITNESS
SUNDAYS OF EASTER YEAR A

INTRODUCTION

We have now completed two of our parish sessions on missional spirituality. We have journeyed through Lent to Easter; from death to life. We await the outpouring of the Spirit of life at Pentecost. In this season, that occurs between Easter day and Pentecost, we might be tempted to go to sleep, relaxing back into old ways and worries.

We know, for instance, that we have serious problems with some of our buildings that will require much attention and possibly heartache in decision making. It is proper for the rector and wardens to warn us of such things. However, I sometimes think that is like talking about adapting to floods and fires without paying attention to the catastrophe of climate change. Both are important and both need addressing; it's just that one is more dangerous and destructive than the other, although one seems more immediate and the other seems a long way off. Both are with us.

The unacknowledged "climate change" for the church in Australia started back in the 1960's. Christendom had died before that but our forebears lived on its carcass until the present day. Today sun-bleached bones are all that remains. As Christendom died in our lifetimes so did its various forms of mission and evangelism. Sunday schools, youth fellowships, evangelistic missions, the parish priest doing everything according to the prayer book, the geographical parish being the centre of everything, adult study groups. Eventually something we did not pay attention to eroded it all.

The West deliberately walked away from its Christian heritage and chose an entirely new and experimental way of living. That deserves a study in its own right but not here. I trust that will be part of our studies in missional spirituality.

Culture has changed. We cannot repeat the past, only the carcass remains. We are starting in a new world order in the Western church. It is a new missional situation. If we do not address that we will no longer be here to worry about the buildings. It is already happening around us if we have our eyes open.

A whole society is deliberately walking away from the Christian faith, replacing it with another that has many facets; intellectual, moral, political, social, economic and spiritual. The church is reduced to a small business, competing against the very big players that have more resources and clout. There is no space in the market for small time spiritual irrelevancies.

The danger for Christian folk is that we can accept this definition of our situation as true, accept its relativism, see ourselves as a form of spiritual or religious club interested in antiquities, depending on taste, and accept our relegation to the world of the private, obscure and exotic.

The Roman world relegated Jesus and his followers in much the same way, first as a Jewish cult then as part of the effluent of the ancient world that flowed out of the Middle East and Egypt and into the Roman empire. Our ancestors refused that designation. It is that refusal and what they responded with that made them an intellectual and spiritual force that Rome could not counter.

My view is that, though our situation is different, our spiritual ancestors had some foundation that seems to elude us. We need to expose and explore what gave them courage and hope.

We are going to be dealing with two very slippery words; one is mission and the other is spirituality. Both are loaded with baggage. I can't give a long discussion of the history their meanings, and all the baggage, so I will tell you how I will try to use the words, hopefully as consistently as I can. Neither definition is original but contains a mixture of ideas that I hope make sense. I trust as you go you will make your own definitions, adding, subtracting and finding new ways of expressing our calling.

In Christianity spirituality includes a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit and in the context of the community of believers sharing a similar relationship, which is nourished by the experiences and practices that support the relationship. Spirituality is concerned with the conjunction of theology, prayer and practical Christianity.

The word mission has two parts to it. The first is 'sent-ness', and the second is the purpose for the 'sent-ness'. So, I think one way to put this together is to say that mission for God's people is all that God the Father, in Jesus Christ, and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is doing in God's great purpose for the restoration and renewal of the whole of creation and all he calls us to do in cooperation with that purpose.

The broadness of these definitions allows us to find the specifics we need and pull them together for our specific calling in our place and time. Also, I hope you can spot the connections between spirituality and mission.

Where to start? Someone wisely noted that the Bible is the sort of text that calls for interpretation not only by means of writing more text about it, but also by the practice of what it preaches. Could anyone really understand what means to love enemies without doing it, or at least seeing it done?

Although we are not the initiators of God's mission, we are crucial agents in its display to our world. We interpret, in our lives, what the Gospel is and what it means for the whole world. Our neighbours might need to see what it means to love the enemy, or perhaps, just the neighbour. Here are some thoughts:

The gospel story . . . defines the life of the Christian and the life of the Church, while the life of the Church and the life of the Christian is, correspondingly, a retelling and reinterpreting of that gospel story. The world has no access to the gospel story other than as it is narrated in the life, worship, and proclamation of the Church. . . . Through its service and being as witness, the Church is a rendering of the gospel to the world.

Gorman, Michael J. *Becoming the Gospel*. (p. 1). Eerdmans.

I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic [means of

interpretation] of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*.

Evangelism is intrinsically relational, the outcome of love of neighbour, for to love our neighbour is to share the love of God holistically. The proper context for evangelism is authentic Christian community, where the expression of loving community is the greatest apologetic for the gospel.

Heath, Elaine A., *The mystic way of evangelism*. 2008, p.13

Each author is making the same point and the two sentences that stand out for me are "Through its service and being as witness, the Church is a rendering of the gospel to the world" and "I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic [means of interpretation] of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it."

Another way of putting this is that Bible is the sort of text that calls for interpretation not only by means of more text but also by the practice of what it preaches. Could anyone really understand what it means to love enemies without doing it, or at least seeing it done?

That will be the aim of these studies; to explore, in these particular texts, the sense of the interpretative community and the spirituality that gives it life.

Some key questions we will keep on asking ourselves are:

What do these texts say, implicitly or explicitly, about God's purposes for the creation, including humans. (That is sometimes called the *missio Dei*).

What do these texts reveal about humanity and the world?

What do these texts say about the nature and mission of God's people in the world, that is, about the church understood as an agent of divine mission.

In what concrete ways, in our specific context, might we deliberately read this text as God's call to us as the people of God to participate in the *missio Dei* to which it bears witness?

What does the text reveal about the spiritual resources available for us as God's agents?

In this introduction I think we need to address an elephant in the room. Respectable Anglicans do not do mission. Some do but they belong to a particular movement within Anglicanism and they reduce mission to cult-like evangelism. It becomes a specialised and manipulating technique to get individuals into heaven, possibly only specially chosen ones.

Let me suggest that this is a mistaken view. The best way to find out what our church thinks about mission is to look for it in our prayer book. A good place to start is at the end of the weekly Eucharist. It is titled THE SENDING OUT OF GOD'S PEOPLE (P.143 if you are interested) and it is full of prayers about this sending out. Perhaps we could meditate on the following quotes from the prayers, remembering that we have just participated in Christ's Body and Blood and received God's blessing in His Presence in the risen Lord and the Spirit:

...help us to grow in love and obedience that we may serve you in the world...

May we who have reached out our hands to receive this sacrament be strengthened in your service; we who have sung your praises tell of your glory and truth in our lives....

May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. **Keep us in this hope that we have grasped; so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name.**

Most loving God,

you send us into the world you love. Give us grace to go thankfully and with courage in the power of your Spirit.

After every Sunday's nourishment and refreshment we are sent to serve God's purposes.

Colin Dundon

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