

## Mission Sermon 11<sup>th</sup> January

Scene: 6pm on the London Underground, Bakerloo line. It is a hot Friday evening, the carriage is crowded with tired commuters and those lucky enough to be sitting are doing their best not to catch the eyes of those standing. I noticed a tall, impressive young man entering the train. As the doors closed and the train moved out towards Piccadilly Circus, he cleared his throat and started to speak.

'My friends, please listen to me for a few minutes. I am here to tell you Jesus loves you. If you do not follow Jesus you will go to hell. But Jesus loves you and asks you to follow him.'

As he went on people studiously read their evening papers and fidgeted – anything but look at him. But he continued. He had clearly worked out the timing of his script, which ended just as the train pulled into Oxford Circus.

'Thank you my friends for listening. Remember, Jesus loves you and I love you too.'

He left the carriage without looking back. But the passengers had been surprised out of their Friday evening apathy. Some laughed. Quite a few applauded. And then people began to talk to one another.

I wonder what you make of that story – perhaps you think that the man was totally mad, offensive, ridiculous, perhaps you have slight admiration for someone who is willing to be courageous enough to stand up and challenge people. Maybe you think it's inappropriate to be threatening people with hell and damnation. Perhaps that's what you think mission and evangelism is all about and its not for you.

Today we are celebrating the 1400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rochester diocese. It was in AD 604 that Augustine of Canterbury made Justus the first bishop of Rochester. Rochester was only the second diocese to be formed in the country at that time, Canterbury being the first.

Bishop Justus was sent to evangelise North West Kent – He arrived as a missionary to bring the good news to the people of Kent. I wonder how he went about it? Did he hold Alpha or Emmaus courses, there weren't any trains so did he stand and argue with people in the market places? Did he get involved in good works in the community and share his faith at the same time? Did he work alongside others?

Gradually his mission bore fruit and the parish system of churches became established in Rochester. Thus meant that everyone in the area came under the pastoral care of a priest, and gradually the church itself moved from a church that concentrated upon mission to one which became pastoral and centred on maintaining its own life and pasturing the flock. This system has worked down the centuries so long as our country was broadly Christian - but now less people come to church and as practising Christians we are in the minority so its time to move back to a missionary focus again.

Today much popular opinion considers the church is dull and irrelevant. It's all pie in the sky. The Church seems to have no significant influence in politics, no really indistinguishable lifestyle apart from the habit of meeting in a large building once a week or month at least. Many people see the church as remote and distant a private club for members.

So as we celebrate the creation of our diocese this year it's an opportunity for us to follow Justus' example and turn our thoughts to mission; indeed Bishop Michael challenges us to engage imaginatively in mission and ministry with our neighbours and communities.

So what is mission? It includes evangelism – proclaiming the good news of the gospel to those who don't believe but its a broader term than evangelism, mission speaks of the total impact of the church on society. It is about proclaiming the Christian gospel in actions and words.

At the end of Matthew's gospel we have what is called the Great commission, Jesus commands us to make disciples of all the nations – we are to call people to follow Jesus, to baptise them and to nurture people in their faith. But do we leave it to others, do we say it's not my thing. Someone wrote 'there are times when our support of mission is so weak that it seems as though Jesus' last words were 'go out into all the world, keep your head down and don't open your mouths if you can possibly help it!'. But mission is not an optional extra, the Church is called to take part in the mission of Jesus, to be good news and live the good news.

One Sunday as they drove home from church, a little girl turned to her mother and said, "Mummy, there's something about the vicar's message this morning that I don't understand." The mother said, "Oh? What is it?" The little girl replied, "Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. He said God is so big that He could hold the world in His hand. Is that true?" The mother replied, "Yes, that's true." "But Mummy, he also said that God comes to live inside of us when we believe in Jesus as our Saviour. Is that true, too?" Again, the mother assured the little girl that what the vicar had said was true. With a puzzled look on her face the little girl then asked, "If God is bigger than us and He lives in us, wouldn't He show through?"

Does God show through in your life – in what you say in what you do? The most effective form of advertisement for the Christian faith is us, our friends and neighbours will base their ideas of the Christian faith on the way they see us. As a church the quality of our lives individually and corporately should make it clear there is something distinctively different about the way we live, and as a church we should be wanting to enlarge our tent.

So where do we start – the disciples stated in Jerusalem that is where they were already. We can start where we live, we all have our own missionary field in a sense – how many people do you know who appear to have no Christian understanding, friends, neighbours, work colleagues. You might think about drawing up a list of them. In the early church the gospel was spread through existing relationships – Andrew found his brother Peter, Philip his friend Nathaniel, Levi invited his colleagues in for a meal.

We can pray for opportunities to get to know people better, to build up relationships with them. When friends share a problem with you how about plucking up courage and telling them you will pray for them, you might be surprised at their reaction – look at the number of people who write prayer requests in the intercessions book in the children's chapel. Many people believe in the power of prayer although they would not call themselves professing Christians.

Recent surveys show the importance of one to one relationships in bringing people to church. Often people say they have found faith through someone years ago 'no one person can

change the world but you can change the world for one person' with the help and enabling of the Holy Spirit, and if you are willing and ready to step out and share the good news.

An old man on the seashore was slowly picking up some of the countless sea creatures which had got stranded on the beach at high tide, and throwing them back into the ocean. A passing jogger laughed 'Just look at the beach – there are thousands of them all dying on the sand! What difference will what you are doing make?'

The old man looked patiently at the handful of creatures he was about to release into new life in the water 'I don't honestly know. But it will make all the difference in the world to these.'

The majority of people have no links with the church – so we will only reach them if we do go out. The early church from the very beginning was a missionary church. The early Christians didn't share their faith from a strong position; they lived in a hostile world. But they went out and met people in the streets, the market places, even in shrines. Of course it's less threatening to meet people on our territory, we can then be in control, we feel safe but the church is most true to its calling when we look outwards and go into the world, when we make ourselves vulnerable. Jesus called us to be fishers of men but sometimes we seem to prefer to stay in the safety of the boat, the church, and spend our time mending our nets or the sails. It can be rather difficult catching fish if you don't put the boat out to sea. Jesus was there where people were. Jesus would never have met these people had he not been at the well and on the roadside or in the houses of tax collectors.

In our reading from Acts we find Paul in Athens, note 'he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.' The word distressed can mean roused to anger, a holy rage– the kind of feeling Jesus had when he turned the moneychangers out of the Temple.

Kaj Munk was the pastor of a church in Denmark. He became the leading spiritual force behind the Danish resistance to Hitler. In January 1944 he was taken away one night and shot in a field. He was an inspiration to those who fought for the freedom of Denmark. He said the Church today - and he was speaking in the 1940's but I don't think things have changed - needs recklessness, it lacks a holy rage – the ability to rage at injustice, a holy anger about things that are wrong in the world, to rage against the ravaging of God's earth and its destruction, to rage when small children die of hunger and those in the west have more than enough to eat, to rage against senseless killing,

Paul saw people giving honour and glory to someone other than God. Paul saw the lostness of the Athenians. What do we see as we look around our town? What do we see as we drive and walk along our streets, as we walk through the school playground, as we walk round our workplaces, the shops? How do we react?

Paul began with the idea that God is at work in his world, and in the world of other religions, all of creation is made in God's image so its not surprising if God also works through people of goodwill and in unexpected ways. Mission is not about working on God's behalf because God is powerless without us, that somehow he desperately needs our help, but recognising where God is already at work and getting alongside him in his work.

Paul also had a realistic expectation of how the people would respond. He knew that not everyone would respond positively, it's the same with us. There might be times when you feel discouraged but you never know what seeds have been sown might just have

brought them a bit closer to God. We are all in a process of being changed and transformed, in our old testament reading from Genesis - God called Abraham to go on a journey. So our spiritual lives are also a journey, we should be moving on in our faith and not stagnating.

So what about Bishop Michael's challenge that parishes should make mission a priority this year – well we have our Parish development Plan which is gradually being implemented and the Outreach committee are planning a missionary event for the Harvest weekend in September. As yet we don't know what form it will take but it's something we can all be involved in as a church.

When Paul went out into communities he expected things to happen, he expected people to be changed. I wonder what Bishop Justus' expectations were when he came to Rochester? What are your expectations - do you believe that we can make an impact as a church on our community? So often we think small because we have small expectations of God, it's been said 'someone thinks of a new idea and before they have finished speaking 12 people think of 50 reasons why it won't work' - William Carey said 'attempt great things for God – expect great things from God.'

In this coming year lets put those words into practise in the mission of our Church – lets think big and pray and expect God to act in a far greater way than we can possibly imagine.

*Alison Newman*

**A Prayer of John Wesley – Never be weary of doing good**

You are never tired, O Lord, of doing us good;  
let us never be weary of doing you service.  
But as you have pleasure in the well-being of your servants,  
let us take pleasure in the service of our Lord,  
and abound in your work and in your love and praise evermore.

**BPC Mission Weekend  
18th & 19th September 2004  
for further details  
watch this space!**