

A Sparkle of Thy Glory

Looking forward to General Chapter Andy Wilkes does some thinking and theology about his practical experiences of being a Missionary

What is Mission?

*'Mission is God's way of loving and saving the world.'*¹

*'For Anglican Christians God's mission is about transformation transforming individual lives, transforming communities and transforming the world.'*²

Mission comes from God and all believers are called to participate in it. It is the spreading of the good news about God, by telling the world about His Son Jesus Christ, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is the sharing of one's faith with others, thereby being an instrument or channel of God's redeeming love. Mission is about going out into the world to shine as a light, and in some small way reflecting the glory of God.

Why do we do Mission?

a) We have a biblical command to do so. Jesus Christ commissioned his followers for mission work:

'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' (Matthew 28:19)

'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptised will be saved.' (Mark 16:15,16)

The first followers quickly recognised their commission to spread the good news. Paul (referring to Psalm 116:10) says: *'But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture- I believed, and so I spoke- we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus.'* (2 Corinthians 4:13,14) Peter instructed the early Church to: *'Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do this with gentleness and reverence.'* (1 Peter 3:15,16)

b) We are called at baptism, through the liturgy of the Church, to do so. In the Anglican baptism service (BCP), at the signing of the cross on the child's forehead, the priest says: *'We receive this child into the Congregation of Christ's flock, and do sign him with the sign of the Cross, in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified.'* The newly baptised or those appointed to speak for them are asked: *'Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?'* To which they reply, *'With the help of God, I will.'* At the sending out from the service, the newly baptised are given a candle with these words: *'You have received the light of Christ; walk in this light all the days of your life. Shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father.'* (Common Worship)

c) In The Rule of the Third Order of the Society of Saint Francis, our Principles commit us to do so. The first aim of the Order is *'to make our Lord known and loved everywhere.'* It says, *'Our Order believes that it is the commission of the church to make the gospel known to all, and therefore accepts the duty of bringing others to know Christ.'* Further, *'This shapes our lives and attitudes to reflect the obedience of those whom our Lord chose to be with him and sent out as his witnesses. Like them, by word and example, we bear witness to Christ in our own immediate environment.'* In our vow of profession we offer ourselves to God: *'seeking to spread the knowledge and love of Christ' in humble service.*

d) Our love for our fellow human beings leads us to do so. As baptised, redeemed, and repentant Christians it is only right that we should feel the desire or need to tell the whole

world our good news. Like a child that is so eager to tell of something wonderful that happened at school, or a teenager so joyful with their news of successful exam results, or a proud parent bearing news of the newborn child, we all love to share good news. We owe it to our friends and family, to those around us for whom we care, to spread the word like ripples rolling outwards on a pond, 'by the love impelled, that moves the sun in heaven and all the stars.'³

How do we do Mission?

a) Firstly, by our own individual witness in everyday life, among family, friends, and work colleagues. We can do this by being good examples of baptised and committed Christians, by recognising our own calling to participate in the fulfilling of our baptismal vows, and the vows of our own religious profession. We are called to a life of holiness and godliness because we serve a Holy God: *'I am God Almighty, walk before me, and be blameless.'* (Genesis 17:1) Jesus set before us a standard to which we must aspire, in the Sermon on the Mount, during which he commands: *'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'* (Matthew 5:48) This is of course, impossible for us to do fully, and we are ever in need of repentance and forgiveness but our genuine attempt to walk with God will be noticed by those around us.

We can also be a witness by being a help in a time of trouble, by lending a hand or giving a shoulder to cry on. We can also make a stand on important issues or lend our support to important causes, speaking out against any kind of prejudice or discrimination. All these ways are acts of mission and spreading the good news.

b) Secondly, through the corporate witness of a Christian community. Our attendance and involvement in our local church and the way that we get involved in the local community that surrounds the church are vitally important types of mission work. In a very real sense we must begin our mission work on our own doorsteps and on our church's doorsteps. Our places of worship must shine as a beacon to those who live around it. The local people in their homes and shops and schools must feel that the church is there for them. It must be welcoming, it must be beckoning. Our corporate witness is also visibly expressed in our membership of a religious order. The TSSF is one religious group among many throughout the world. We are an eclectic group of individuals bound by a common commitment to a Rule and a way of life, inspired by our Lord Jesus, after the examples of our patron Saints Francis and Clare. Yet together we join with all the other professing Christians, of every denomination, in a corporate worship of God and a pronouncement of the Gospel. A living cloud of witnesses for the entire world to see.

c) Thirdly, through outreach initiatives among wider communities and nations, or smaller minority groups. I will explore this third way more fully by referring to my own involvement in work among a definite group of people with their own distinctive culture - 'bikers'. The following points are observations from my own experience but may be useful to others considering work in other fields. I have placed, therefore, the specific details of my own work in italics.

Personal Observations of Mission Work

• Preparation.

It is vital before embarking on any missionary outreach work to do your homework. You need to know the field in which you are going to get involved, and you need to know your target audience. You need to find out about the history of the type of people amongst whom you are going to be working. You need to be familiar with their culture and customs, so as to avoid any unnecessary mistakes or embarrassment later on.

I had been a motorcyclist since I was a teenager and had always been fascinated by the culture of the people who called themselves 'bikers.' Most interesting of all were those who were on the fringes of this group, the so-called 'outlaw bikers.' After becoming a Christian in my 30's I felt called to spread the good news among my fellow motorcyclists, and especially among this fringe group. There were already Christian clubs well established in this field and I enquired about joining one of them. I decided to join an American based club and got permission to set up the organisation here in the UK. I knew a little of the culture and the

ways of doing things but I soon discovered that there was far more to it than just sewing on some patches and riding a bike..

- **Acceptance**

It is vital that you identify with the people that you are going to work among, and that you share in their way of life. You are more likely to be accepted if you have a common identity. However, this must be authentic or else it will fail. You must also earn respect and credibility from those already involved in your mission field, and this may be the most challenging part.

In my circumstances this meant having the right sort and style of motorcycle and dressing in the familiar jeans, leather jacket and the 'cut off'- a sort of sleeveless denim tunic worn over the leather jacket. I was fortunate to own an old Harley Davidson, as it would have been pointless and ineffective riding a moped! My bike was a useful 'icebreaker' – a point of first contact with the people that I met. Although my bike was at the cheaper end of the market, some of the Christian bikers rode very costly machines that they entered into shows and competitions. It was a good, albeit, expensive way of attracting people, and being accepted. Gaining the respect of the other Christian clubs was vital if we were going to be established. I soon found out who the major players were and introduced our fledgling club and myself. The feedback, some of it negative, was very useful in making sure we were doing things right in the sight of those around us.

You need to participate in the things that those around you are doing. This shared activity is expected to be done publicly. This is also a way of showing respect, and earning respect in return. This is most important if the surrounding culture is potentially aggressive. You earn respect by getting alongside people, walking alongside them in their journey, meeting them where they are. Making friends with groups already involved in the mission field can also be a good way to be accepted.

For me this meant attending motorcycle shows and rallies. The 'outlaw biker' that I was most keen to reach would typically frequent custom bike shows at places like the Ace Café in London. So, I would ride there dressed in my jeans and leathers, wearing the back-patch of the American club of which I was a member. Through a friend in another Christian club, I received an invite to attend the clubhouse of the premier outlaw club. Both excited and nervous I accepted. We decided that I should go to the clubhouse wearing my back-patch but with it covered with another jacket. This enabled me to ask the outlaw club members if I could wear my patch. This showed respect and put the onus on them to grant permission, this was a vital part of club culture.

- **Getting the Message Across**

Thankfully the days of bashing a Bible and preaching 'fire and brimstone' to the unconverted are over, and certainly in my experience would have been ineffective and downright dangerous! Groups allowing Christians into their midst are unlikely to tolerate fanatical or pushy missionaries. The message of the Gospel must be relevant to those around you and the situation in which they find themselves. Catholic priest Vincent Donovan soon discovered, in his mission work among the Masai tribe in Africa, that much of his message was irrelevant. His experience will be discussed a little later. It may sound obvious but the Gospel message must be conveyed in a language that will be understood. In my experience, this includes translations of the Bible.

The first time I heard of 'The Message' (a contemporary language version of the Bible) was when I saw one of the Christian motorcycle ministries using extracts from it in their outreach work. I was still a King James man, or at the very least Revised Standard Version. However, I soon realised that this new paraphrase was actually getting the message across in a style of language that people on the streets were using. I have since discovered for myself that this was the style of language in which most of the Bible, certainly the Gospels, was originally written in.⁴ As beautiful as I find the KJV, it is no more meaningful for the ordinary person on the street than Shakespeare's verses are. In fact, by having the Bible in such language we run the risk of elevating it to such a high position of literary reverence that we never actually read it! God must be allowed to speak to us, and to those who we wish to reach, using the everyday language of the home, the schoolroom, the workshop and the bar. 'Go out and train

everyone you meet, far and near, in his way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵

I also discovered that having badges, bibles, or tracts to give away was most useful, as everyone likes to receive something for free.

In connection with getting the message across, we must always take care that we do not allow ourselves to be swallowed up in the prevailing culture. The sin of pride can quickly distract us. We must be in the world but not of the world. St Francis was wise enough to prepare his friars carefully for missions overseas: 'Behold I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be prudent as serpents and simple as doves.'⁶ He told them not to engage in arguments or disputes but urged them to be humble, and even to expect persecution and death.

• **Making a Contribution**

It is most important that your commitment is seen as relevant and that what you are doing is interesting. Find a way to contribute to the community, to be of value to the people you are working with.

One of the ways in which the Christian clubs have been able to show their relevance is in the area of civil ceremonies. There are many qualified workers who can carry out weddings and funerals among these groups. There are ministers who have specially designed hearses to transport departed loved ones by motorcycle on their final journey. Similarly, weddings conducted by someone seen as being alongside them and from within their own peer group are far more meaningful to them and an excellent opportunity for Christians to spread the Gospel.

• **Continued Support**

As people respond to your message or come to join you, you must put in place a structure that can stand on its own. It is important that those people who make a commitment are encouraged to take on leadership roles themselves. It is, of course, to be expected that you will make long-term friendships and these need to be nurtured and cherished. The new Christian community also needs to be allowed to develop and grow in its own way.

Motorcycle clubs have a definite structure, with some of them mimicking military ranks. All begin as probationers or 'prospects' and work their way up, earning their 'colours' as they go. After a number of years of involvement in the field of motorcycle ministry, I decided it was time to hand over the reigns to younger and more energetic people. New members that had joined were encouraged to take on leadership roles which allowed me to step back and leave things in their hands. I made many friends through this outreach and gained valuable experience. I have no way of knowing how many people came to know the Lord through our work, but I always saw our mission as 'sowing seeds'. I resolved to let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

'Christianity Rediscovered'

In the late 1960's Vincent Donovan, a Roman Catholic priest was called to work as a missionary among the tribes of Eastern Africa. He tried, at first, to use the traditional methods that missionaries had been using for decades but soon realised that they were no longer working. The tribes' children were being educated in mission schools but as soon as they became adults, they disappeared back into the bush, with no apparent evidence that they were converted at all. He also realised that his catholic practises and even some of his doctrines were totally incomprehensible to the Masai. For example, the Masai had no concept of forgiveness within their culture. Donovan realised that all he could do was to give them the bare bones of the Gospel message, and then stand back to let them decide how they would respond to, and participate in, a God they now knew in their own terms. In this respect the 'church' is our response to God, the response of baptised, believing Christians. Therefore, mission work is giving people the essence of the life-saving, life- redeeming good news of the Gospel. Donovan distils it down to, 'Repent, believe, be baptised, witness to Christ in the Spirit until he comes again. This is the response to the Christian message. That is the church.'⁷

Conclusion

The Third Order has a common identity as penitents in the world. Inspired by Christ and St Francis we have a commitment to our rule which binds us together as a community. Within this community we can discern different gifts and talents among our members. There are different levels of commitment according to individual circumstances, and this allows for involvement in a variety of areas of mission. It is desired that this diversity of knowledge and experience can be passed on and distributed throughout the Order, using a variety of media, including this 'TSSF – Studies' emailing list. We should also endeavour to make ourselves known, as tertiaries, among our own church communities, always being ready to shine as a light in the world and to give an account of our faith. The purpose of mission must be to make Christ known to all, while we still can.

'O Eternal Beam! Give my tongue power, but to leave one sparkle of thy glory, unto the race to come, that shall not lose Thy triumph wholly.'⁸

¹ Lambeth Conference 1998, Section 11 p121.

² Quoted from: www.cofe.anglican.org/faith/mission/missionevangeliism.html

³ Dante, *Paradise*, Canto xxxiii 135. Translated by Rev. Henry Cary, OUP 1923.

⁴ See Eugene H Peterson; *Eat This Book*, Hodder 2006.

⁵ Matthew 28:19, *The Message*, Eugene H Peterson, NavPress 1993 (2003).

⁶ Francis of Assisi, *Early Documents I*, New City Press 1999, p74.

⁷ Vincent J Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, SCM 1978 (2001), p.67.

⁸ Dante, *Paradise*, Canto xxxiii 66, (Cary 1923)