

Mission March 8th 2012

I. Mission in early Christian times

1. The NT starts with the most critical Mission of all time. Gabriel is sent to ask Mary to be the mother of God. Anselm speculates on the other angels trembling with anxiety: what if she refuses? Of course she does not. Artists have tried to paint Gabriel. But how do you paint a spirit? Flowing robes, golden hair are the best they can do. In fact the word Angel does not describe a being – as we would say this is a chair, I am a man – but rather a task. An angel essentially is one sent on a message.

More importantly there is another Mission in this scene. The Holy Spirit is sent to effect the Incarnation. We will look later at this matter of Mission within God himself. But first to notice just a few of the Missions at the start of Christ's earthly life. In the sixth verse of John's gospel we read "A man came sent by God (to be) a witness to speak for the light."

Jesus' first sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth starts: "The spirit of the Lord has been given to me.. he has sent me to bring the good news to the poor." He stresses the fact that it is this "sending" that the synagogue worshippers are witnessing. Later he sent out the 12 "to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (Lk 9,2) Later (Lk 10,1) "The Lord appointed 72 others and sent them out ahead of him, in pairs, to all the towns and places he himself was to visit." And so it goes on through Jesus' ministry, till both Matthew and Mark end their accounts with the mandate: "Go out to the whole world: proclaim the Good News to all creation." Mk 16,16 "baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you."

Put yourself in the shoes of those apostles the day after the Ascension. Jesus spoke parables but gave minimal instructions. None of the blueprints, Mission statements, 5-year plans – You are Living Stones - we have known in recent times. The Acts of the Apostles picks up the story of how they started. Still they frequented the Temple. A miracle of Peter and John is recorded as they went up for the "prayers of the ninth hour" (acts 3,1) They met in their homes "for the teaching of the Apostles, the brotherhood, the breaking of bread and the prayers". So much had to be worked out: the proclamation of Jesus and his mission, the internal practices of Christianity, their relation to both the law and the community of the Jewish religion to mention only a few. Naturally the internal life and organisation of the church took precedence. But it was not long before the persecution following the murder of Stephen jolted the nascent church into its duty of mission. Many fled Jerusalem Acts 8, 1 & 4 "everyone except the apostles fled to the country districts of Judaea and Samaria." But "Those who had escaped went from place to place preaching the Good News".

What started as disaster turned out to be simply the next stage of the development of the tender church. Seemingly they had not had long to consolidate belief, preaching and practice before they were launched by the Spirit on the road to Mission.

There are many legends about how far the apostles spread. Thomas is believed to have reached India. Less reliably Andrew is connected with Spain. Paul the most dynamic of the

missionary journeymen, travelled back and forth through and around the Mediterranean and ended in Rome only partly by his own design. Peter took the centre of the church to the heart of the then political regime. It was persecuted there, but it made sense to use the fine communication systems of the Roman Empire for the task of making the church effective everywhere in the world of that time.

II. Decline of Mission. Emergence of forms of Consecrated Life.

Time and history rolled on. Rome declined, the Barbarians invaded. The so-called Dark Ages followed. The emphasis on missionary activity disappeared. Communities of religious and forms of eremitical life sprang up. There were tower hermits and pole hermits and coenobitic hermits. These were dedicated followers of Jesus who deliberately moved out of the cities and into remote places, very often in deserts and austere conditions. And the alleged principal motivation was a fear that the corrupt secular world would undermine their faith and pose a danger to their eternal salvation. It was the beginning of what we know now as Religious Life or Consecrated Life. Prominent in their number were the Desert Fathers like Antony of the Desert and Pachomius. The first concern of these holy men and women was their personal salvation, though no doubt their way of life was of benefit to the body of the faithful and to others. Benedict introduced a more organised form of monastic living together. A group of men or women opted to follow a set rule of life. The Monastery tended to be largely self-sufficient, such was its efficient organisation. It afforded a measure of protection to the people of its immediate surrounds and some help with practical charity. But the main work - the so-called *Opus Dei* - was the hours of the Monastic Office and Mass around which their daily programme was organised. Mission, spreading the Good News was not on the agenda. It did happen to an extent as a natural consequence. A large Abbey provided some work. The church was open for access at the times of Mass and prayer. Frequently they provided schools to share their learning. We can see that the advent of these forms of consecrated life was of value and importance to the church and an expression of its essential life and being. But it left the equally important dimension of mission to be developed. This was picked up by St Francis, but not until the twelfth Century.

III Theological basis for Mission

1. The inner nature of God

Before we come to him however it is well to go deeper into the theology of Mission. Mission lies at the centre of God's being. Father Son and Holy Spirit are ceaselessly givers of self to other. That constitutes the inner nature and action of God - as far as we can understand the incomprehensible. Our picture is of each going out of himself in gift to the other. Father gives himself to the Son, which giving is seen as the generation of the Holy Spirit. It is of course a totally inadequate human construct which in no way does justice to the inner nature of God. What is beyond question is the element of giving. Keeping nothing for self.

That is the first stage of the theological basis for our being missionary. You could say that since man is made in the image and likeness of God, it is also of his essence that he be a giver of himself to others.

2. Why did God send his Son into the world? The Primary Motive of the Incarnation.

The next line of search into why we have to be missionary begins with God sending his Son into the world. This giving of self is expressed most intensely on Calvary. That is the supreme expression of God's love – or simply God himself.

But let's take a little time to ask: just Why God did send his Son into the world? – and then: Into what world was he so sent?

The classical answer was this: It was a Plan B after Plan A for the whole creation had failed. God made the world good: without death or pain or sin. That was Plan A. Adam then wrecked this scheme of things, so God had to cast about for an alternative, a remedy to patch up the disaster. The Son was sent to clear up the mess Adam and Eve had made of God's first intention, which presumably was that the ideal state of the Garden of Eden should continue indefinitely.

But for several reasons that is just not good enough.

First of all: God coming into the world is too big a thing for it to depend on a human accident. The incarnation was part of God's original plan. It was God's original plan. The In-carnation is the central fact around which everything else in and about creation revolves.

When you read Paul in Philippians and Colossians it is hard to understand how the old belief - that Christ's coming was prompted only by the need to repair the damage - ever gained hold. "He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning to act upon when the times had run their course to the end, that he would bring everything together under Christ as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth.... (we are) chosen from the beginning under the predetermined plan of the one who guides all things as he decides by his own will, chosen to be for his greater glory the people who would put their hopes in Christ."

2.2 Into what world was the Son sent?

From eternity God made his plan of creation. From the start, the purpose of God was/is to create a world for the Son, of which the Son would be the centre and the whole purpose. God took his time in creating. Through billions of years the plan gradually developed from crude beginnings to more complexly organised systems. The human race emerged. Then "in the fullness of time" God sent his Son into the world. But more than that. It is not like a Son taking possession of a house built for him. God became In-carnate. Have we taken this seriously enough? He becomes part of the world: the world becomes part of him. The world is not a hostile and dangerous threat to human well-being and holiness. It is something to be taken over, seasoned. The Incarnation of God's Son is like the process of yeast working all through

the lumpish dough and lightening, invigorating, giving it life. That is what God intended from the beginning, rather than a patch-up job to repair the damage Adam did. The implications of this new understanding of God's purpose in creating reach far into all our thinking about God, about human life, about the nature of church and its purpose. The church is not an organisation existing for itself. It is for the service of the world.

Not least it calls in question that perception we saw in early consecrated life: of the world as a danger, to be fled. There is a sense in which the world is a danger. We know the old warning to be aware and to guard against "the devil, the world and the flesh". Some spiritualities stress this flight from the world more strongly. Prayer is sometimes seen as a metaphorical running away into the desert, shutting out everything else but God. On the other hand "God so loved the world he gave his only Son". The measure and evidence of just how much God loves the world is shown on Calvary. That shows how far God is prepared to go both in loving the world and then in demonstrating his love. The purpose of the Incarnation of his Son is that he will enter into the very centre, and exercise his influence till it permeates all parts. There is imperfection from the start. There is evil in the world. But when you look more closely at what evil is, you see it is simply the absence of the good that ought to be there. Famine is the absence of food. All sin is an absence of love properly ordered. The Son has come into the world to supply the essential element that is lacking in the natural process of evolution. Having identified himself totally with us – fleshly creatures – Christ draws us into himself, seeks our conscious and willing choice of himself and his project. The process is far from complete. Indeed it often looks very much to be going backwards into greater chaos and evil rather than forwards into a loving Kingdom of Christ. God does not show his hand and we have to take it on faith.

3. Corresponding mission of church to the secular world

If God so loved the world that he gave his only son to season it, permeate it, give it life and direction, then equally the mission of the church must be similar. This is precisely the vision taken up by Vatican II.

"The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time – this is our task and agenda" So began the document on the Church in the Modern world. God calls all persons to holiness of life. This is not something reserved for a chosen elect of clergy and religious. Everyone is called to be holy. All are equally called to play their parts in the work of making the church. The church in turn exists for the service of the world. The whole People of God is directed to the making of God's total creation in all its aspects, secular as well as religious. In playing their part in the cosmic project each member of the church, whether cleric or lay, Pope or pauper, has a unique task to do in building up the Body of Christ, the purpose of creation. Keep your eye firmly on the Primary Motive of the Incarnation.

IV Contribution of St Francis and the Franciscans

Back to St Francis. He had much to do with the new direction theology and the practice of the church took from his time. When Francis took his way of life to the Pope for approval the Pope at first demurred. Too dangerous he thought; impossibly idealistic. The Pope suggested Francis

fit himself and his followers into the Benedictine pattern of monasticism. But Francis – like St Paul – knew he was being lead directly by the Holy Spirit. His mission was to go to the homes and social meeting points, to the places where the human project was most intense and often most turbulent, with the purpose simply of preaching the Gospel “no one showed me what I should do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel.”(Testament)

How this was to work out in practice only gradually became clear. It took a leap forward when in 1219 Francis, scandalised by the unChristianity of the Crusades, decided to go personally to the Sultan, Malik el Kamil. His simple idea was that he would convert the Sultan to Christianity – the reasonableness of doing this was to Francis self-evident – and so the whole horror of the fighting would stop.

Francis managed to meet the Sultan. He approached him as a human being who needed to be changed. Preaching Christ to him would effect this change. But the encounter went very differently. The Sultan too was a good, sincere and well-intentioned man. After some days the two parted, but on a very different understanding of each other. Francis had expected to find a candidate for conversion. Instead he found a brother whose understanding of God, man, world was to be respected. Each asked the other to pray for him and promised to pray for the other. There is a fragment of a MS preserved in Francis hand that is believed to be the record of this prayer. Some of Francis prayers show a strong Muslim influence in structure.

Francis returned home. The Christians continued to pillage rape and slaughter and no doubt there was wrong on the Muslim side as well. But Francis had learned a most important lesson. He already knew he was led by the Holy Spirit. Accordingly he was totally flexible to the nudges of this Spirit and avoided fixed plans such as big buildings which take over the lives of people and organisations, or getting monopolised by a particular pastoral task such as leper-care. That he knew already. The new discovery was that he must also avoid presuming that he knew what was good for other people. Instead of trying to change the Sultan into a conforming catholic, he had to respect the man’s faith and leave him to be himself, and pray that he be himself more completely. On another occasion - Responding to a plea for help from one of his brothers who was getting a hard time from the friars in his care, Francis reply was: Don’t give up – and don’t even pray that they be better Christians. In other words whatever happens God is in charge, and it is not your business to decide for Him what he should be doing, or how other people should be shaping up.

Now all of this has a lot to tell us about our task of Mission. Every baptised Christian has a mission. All the rest of the human race also have a mission, as Francis discovered in the Sultan. The church has a Mission. The Diocese of Nottingham has a mission. Our parishes within have each a Mission. I would be bold and foolish – especially in the light of Francis’ experience – to tell you what it is. All I can do is to pick up some of the pointers that can help us listen to what the Spirit is now saying to us at all these levels.

V. More recent Mission

Let us now pick up the geographical missionary practice of the church where we left off. Francis renewed the missionary surge of the church. His brothers went and still go to all parts of the world. Particularly after the Council of Trent many Institutes were set up for the sole purpose of taking the Gospel to foreign countries where it had not yet been preached.

The understanding of the task and mandate varied. Was it primarily to tell the good news to people who had not heard of Christ, and to make them Catholic? That would be the sense of the final passage of Matthew and Mark's Gospels. I have childhood memories of "buying black babies" I remember strips of thick paper comprising 12 small pockets linked together. Each required insertion of one old penny, to be sealed. When I had filled all 12 it went to the Friary and I felt virtuous because I had bought a Black Baby. The simple understanding was that it would be baptised, snatched into the catholic church, saved from eternal exclusion from heaven - but the further details remained obscure. How crude, patronising and ill-conceived this was.

The real work of our so-called foreign missions was more enlightened. They went to preach Christ, and found that doing this involved attending to the need for education, health-care, social organisation they discovered in their audience. They did it well. I find many immigrants from African countries today are better instructed in their faith than many in our home parishes. And certainly many are more committed to their catholic life.

The new understandings of Vatican II were quickly spread through the missionary territories. Indeed many came thence, because the Missionaries were doing real evangelisation. Foreign Missions – now properly called Mission to all People, are still part of the church's task.

For many decades now this kind of activity has met increasing resistance. It is seen in many countries as a form of Imperialism, Colonialism, tainted with a presumption of superiority in those who come. It is seen as a threat to indigenous religion and culture. Providing for basic human needs has always been part of the foreign missionary work. It remains increasingly the way we contribute to this dimension of Foreign Mission, with support of organisations such as CAFOD. Our church's record is impressive. While Catholics contribute to all manner of good works, CAFOD stands high in the rank of the principal givers of foreign aid and funds to meet disasters. CAFOD does not build churches. It deals with human needs and responds to large-scale human disasters. That is because "insofar as you did it to the least of these you did it to me" For many years successive Popes have spelled out with increasing clarity and insistence the church's Social Teaching.

VI. What is our task?

We come to the crucial question: Is this enough? Is there more we are expected to do. Of course there is. Christ needs to be preached on our doorstep. We are said to live in a post-Christian society. It is there that Christ wants to come to bring healing love, and we are the ones he now sends before him to prepare the way.

I have suggested several items emerging from Christian history that can help us both to identify the task and how to set about it. Or perhaps to become aware of how we are already setting about it.

1. At the last judgement, at least according to Matthew, you will not be asked how many hours you spent in church – but whether you fed the hungry, gave shelter to strangers, and visited the sick and imprisoned.
2. It is not our task to change people; still less to know into what they should be changed. When we meet, say, Muslims it is an occasion to develop friendly relations. Through that we become better Christians and they better Muslims.
3. Our witness is not in the realm of the Holy. You are secular, and your mission is to the secular world. You may bring people into conscious Christian and catholic practice, but as a consequence rather than as something directly aimed at.
4. We need to look closely at the local environment in which we live. The human needs, the failures to provide essential human rights are our agenda. And that is because God so loves the actual world, as it is.
5. We cannot stop simply with the human, but our care must go to the environment and its issues, for that too is part of the world God loves.
6. Francis is often quoted as saying: Preach the Word; use words if you need to. Not exactly his words, but they convey his meaning. Our task is to live the Gospel. If we really do that people will notice and gradually be influenced by it. Just think how that is already happening in your life.
7. I find consolation in Jesus' words: The poor you have always with you. Our task is to go out to them. Not to cure the evil.

Many years ago we presented an examination of conscience to our deanery in Lent. It took the form of a drama presented by our young people and based on C S Lewis' fantasy of Screwtape. Screwtape is an ageing devil, set on instructing his young nephews on how to tempt and spoil the good works and intentions of pious people. In one scene Screwtape takes his pupils – by video – to eavesdrop on several Parish Council meetings. Predictably these were preoccupied with in-church business: finance, church repairs, liturgical niceties. Screwtape rubbed his hands in delight: "Keep them focused on these, my beauties. In this way they will miss doing their real task of spreading the Gospel." We had counted 13 locations within a radius of a mile or so, where Sunday mass was said. "Keep them fighting to preserve these churches and chapels and separate communities" said Screwtape, "then they will not spread elsewhere where they could do me much damage". I regret to say the drama was not well received. I am only partly repentant. It would be worth revisiting today.

My conclusion is simple. If a parish wants to be worthy of survival, it must be a parish fully convinced of its divine mission to be a really effective tool to change the secular environment in which it stands. The immediate task is for each to identify and spell out its unique context, and get to work on it.