

Thoughts for preaching: St Andrewstide 2005

Preaching at St Andrewstide on mission, unless there is a service on St Andrew's Day itself, usually means preaching on the First Sunday of Advent. And the last thing we will want to do is to oust the great themes of the Advent season, by creating some new distraction. However, it does not need to be like that. Advent is, after all, the season *par excellence* of mission: the time when we remember that the focus of all mission was the sending by the Father of his own dear Son into the world to bring salvation, and the time when we look forward to the fulfillment of the mission of Christ when all things are gathered up in him on the last day.

The Gospel reading, as if knowing our quandary about St Andrew's Day and Advent Sunday lying so close to each other, almost confirms the link, unwittingly in its opening verse:

'Jesus said to.....Andrew....
"In those days, after that suffering,
they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds
with great power and glory".'

The truth is, the whole of the Christian life and message is to do with mission. One definition of 'mission' is, after all, that which the church is sent to do in the world. But in a deeper way, mission is what God does in the world which belongs to him. That is the enduring message of these readings. It can be illustrated by three different themes emerging from them.

1. *God is at work amidst all the realities of the world.*

One of the factors which drives people on in the mission of Christ is the vision of a new and different world in which Christ reigns and his kingdom is come. We have a sense that the church is to be a little glimpse of heaven on earth, where appetites are whetted for the kingdom of God. But the very first reading of this new Church year immediately earths us in reality:

'You [God] were angry, and we sinned,
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We will all fade like a leaf,
And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.'

The mission of God is carried out in real situations, among sinful human beings, and even at times when it appears that not only the world, but the people of God, have strayed very far from what they are meant to be. If we could actually bring in the kingdom in our own strength, there would be no need for the Advent mission of Christ. But it is the initiative of God, the Father- the one who is the potter while we are the clay- appearing, sometimes in ways to be feared, but never to destroy, tearing the heavens open and coming down, which makes mission effective.

I remember once a parishioner, who was a bit of a literateur, coming bounding up to me at the end of an Advent service, to extol the virtues of Charles Wesley, in his Advent hymn 'Lo! He comes', for that last and memorable line: 'Everlasting God, come down!'. Imagine speaking to God in such a direct way- a total lack of religious language. But this is what lies at the heart of all mission: getting down into the mess of humanity to bring in God's purposes. The key truth is that God works with and in the realities of life.

2. *God speaks to the world in the lives of believers.*

In the New Testament Reading, from 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, we are brought face to face with the amazing truth that, even with all our weaknesses and frailties, God uses us who believe in forwarding his purposes. That is incredible, when you think of the faults and failings which are to be revealed about the Corinthian church later in these letters. No matter what is imperfect in our humanity, there is a glimpse of Christ which comes through the testimony of our Christian lives:

"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you."

Allowing myself to get a little carried away in preaching recently, I was suggesting that if a church could not offer *x*, *y* and *z*, it didn't deserve to be called a church! A godly listener came up to me afterwards to point out that, according to my calculations, most of the churches of the New Testament, with all their faults, wouldn't be churches at all! Perhaps part of the value of being involved in worldwide mission in a worldwide communion is to be able to see our failings through the eyes of others!

But in reality God amazingly uses the lives of 'faulty' believers in which he is truly, if not always obviously, present, in the bringing in of his kingdom. We should not be surprised when God brings people to faith through us, or raises kingdom questions through us, or ministers to people's needs through us, or even if people tell us that they see something of Jesus in our lives. Christ will make himself known, by his indwelling Spirit, through his people – 'by him', as the last verse of our reading states, 'you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ'.

3. *God will bring all things to perfection at the end of time.*

His mission will be completed. Not partially, but utterly. That is expressed in Paul's message to the church in Corinth when he says:

'He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

His mission will be completed in our perfection on the day of his coming, when as a bridegroom, he meets the Church, his perfect bride. His mission is also completed not

only in our personal holiness and salvation, but in achieving all that he planned to do from the beginning of time. Jesus makes this even clearer in our Gospel from Mark 13:

‘Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the ends of heaven.’

Not one will be lost. Not one aspect of the bringing in of the kingdom will be incomplete. Not one part of his worldwide and creation-wide mission will be unfulfilled.

Our task in mission, therefore, is to ‘go with the flow’. To observe what God is doing and to get behind it. To notice the buds on the fig tree and discern what they mean. To stay awake to the values and priorities of kingdom life. All in readiness for that day when the God who has worked in the realities of a fallen world and made himself known in glimpses through his people, will come visibly again in power and great glory, to complete all he has begun in and through his Son Jesus Christ.

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