

Modern Church South West Group Day Conference

Contemplative Practice As Mission (1).

Blessed are the poor in spirit

‘Preach the Gospel. Use words if you must’<sup>1</sup> writes a wandering friar, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. What would happen to the Church’s mission if these words were to underpin all of its outreach activities?

Today, the institutional Church is dismissed by many as of marginal relevance. It’s seen as a niche activity for a certain kind of special interest group, but rarely of interest to those who have either become cynical about the Christian faith, or who have been put off the Church by tactics that come across as a kind of marketing strategy, driven by managerial concerns, whose principal aim is to get more people into church, so justifying the Church’s existence.

Others are wary of finding themselves emotionally vulnerable in religious surroundings, especially if the emotional climate is generated by a particular individual, or by a collective mindset. At the more Catholic end of the Church’s life people are often grateful for the personal space which the rites and liturgy of sacramental worship give, but they can also experience this as unfriendliness. These churches can feel cliquey and unwelcoming.

Both of the scenarios I have described suggest a need for a re-thinking of the nature of mission and evangelism and of how this will affect the way the Church thinks of itself and of its mission. It will also help to define how individual churches ‘present’ to the wider community.

How a church comes across to people is not simply a matter of friendliness, or of attracting the theologically like-minded. It is about the extent to which those who may be

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<sup>1</sup> This is an abbreviation of the original as it appears in the Rule of St. Francis. It is, taken from a broader context and reads: ‘let all the brothers preach by their works’ .  
From the first rule <https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/wosf/wosf06.htm>

coming to church for the first time recognise the living fire of God's love at work in that place. This begs a further question: does coming to a particular building and conforming to specific norms and expectations (liturgical or otherwise) constitute being part of the Church in the fullest sense? Or does the newcomer feel like a visitor who, arriving in a country or a social setting for the first time, feels completely disorientated, and embarrassed by not being able to speak the language? We've all experienced something like this, I'm sure.

I would like to propose, in this paper, that the 'church language' problem, what makes a church feel cliquy or unwelcoming to the newcomer, gets solved by a deeper language that underpins the life of that particular community. This is the language of sincerity and truth, a language which may or may not involve words, a language which assumes that a relationship, or connection, already exists between the newcomer and those who are making that person feel welcome in whatever context they happen to be in.

All of this begs a few more questions in regard to church and to the business of mission itself. Does the newcomer, who may already feel quite alienated from the Church for any number of reasons, feel, as a result of sensing this deeper commonality of language, that they not only belong, but are in a uniquely deep communion with others and, together with them, with God? A friendly welcome at the door and polite conversation over coffee does not really do this for people. What is needed is a genuine engagement with the person concerned.

Why, after all, would they be seeking a connection with God in the context of a church service, if that is what they are really doing? They may have made that connection, wittingly or unwittingly, in the context of ordinary day to day life, as many of us do. But they may not have made it in communion with others in a formal worshipping environment. They will have perhaps sensed a need for some kind of depth to their interactions with others, in the work place, in the context of their own particular social circles, or even in the loneliness and isolation of the Covid lockdown months, but they may not have experienced *koinonia*, that depth of relationship which exists between Christians who are seeking to know God together, even allowing for their differences and disagreements.

Furthermore, the person who senses a need for what might be loosely described as 'the spiritual' will not necessarily have identified this need with religion. Not surprisingly perhaps. People are frightened of religion, given the devastation which religion, put to the service of ideologies, including the quasi-religious ideology of the far right, is capable of wreaking on nations, communities and ethnic minorities. The Church is not

immune to the blandishments of powerful ideologues like Donald Trump, especially if they result in increased numbers on a Sunday morning.

Spiritual seekers, and a growing number of Christians, recognise these false prophets for what they are. Most of these seekers would probably tick the box marked 'none' in religious survey questionnaires. Or they might describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious'. But all these people Jesus would have described as 'poor in spirit'. He would have called them blessed or 'happy'.

They are blessed in their need for God, even if they don't own it as such. It is a need that is seldom met by organised religion or by the institutional Church as it currently presents itself. The Church, on the whole, does not seem able to shape itself to their eclectic expressions of a higher power and their need to connect with it often through nature and quasi magical practices, with the possible exception of the traditional liturgy they encounter in cathedrals and in the Orthodox churches. Neither is that need met in what has become a form of ecclesial 'branding' exercise originally sourced, in the UK at least, from a large evangelical church in Knightsbridge. Sooner or later, people wake up to the fact that branded religion is just another commodity, designed to appeal to the consumer. It lacks authenticity and mystery.

Spiritual seekers seek both mystery and authenticity. They do not need to hear the truth spoken, so much as to share in its life, the living out of a truth learned through deep engagement with the Holy Spirit with all the risks that such an engagement entails. Much that is dismissed as magic and nature worship, or simply 'alternative', is arguably a quest for the Holy Spirit.

So it is not surprising that these spiritual seekers do not necessarily want to be taught how to pray in the way 'religious' people pray. In fact, such a proposal would only embarrass and alienate them. What they do sense a need for is the company of people who both wrestle in prayer (however they understand that word) and rest in it, on an almost continuous basis, people who run towards some greater power or more brilliant light while standing still in a place of darkness or 'unknowing'. These people are searching for what, in a sense, they have already found.

If the Jesus of the beatitudes were speaking to these spiritual seekers, and to those who wrestle with inherited ideas of spirituality today, his words might roughly translate as "Consider yourselves lucky if you can't pray, if you have no words left to say and no sense of

connection with church religion. You have already arrived in the Kingdom of Heaven.” It is their poverty of ‘spirit’ which would appeal to him, a poverty that pertains not just to feeling the need for God, but of not being able to connect with God in the ways they have become accustomed to think of as the right ones, but which no longer work for them.

Some of them may have given up on prayer altogether, as can happen to many of us from time to time, if we’re honest about it. They will frequently be asking themselves if there really is a God, or if the one they pray to, is the one they’re accustomed to believing in. They may still be realists, but their realism will increasingly derive from a sense of the sacred that surrounds them, from a sense of God revealed in all of creation. They may distance themselves from the Christian God but still retain a sense of the supreme Creator, the *Pantocrator* of the Christian icon, perhaps. In short, they will be contemplatives at heart.

They will also be prophets. Some of them will be climate activists, their ‘rebellion’ at one with Christ’s anger in the face of indifference to suffering and, were he to be alive today, of lazy disregard for the earth and its future. In other words, they will have a deep understanding of the significance of matter, beginning with their reverence for the earth and for all living things. Their spirituality will have a tactile dimension to it. Others will be healers of the broken, particularly of women and of womankind in general. To these modern day panentheists, passionate about the environment and to those sensing a divine purpose of some kind at work in its suffering, Jesus might have said “you are not far from the kingdom of heaven”. The demarcation line, the veil, between what we like to think of as the unconverted and the person of faith, is a thin one.

### **Spiritual but not religious**

For them, and for many who consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious (SBNR’s) the words ‘mission and evangelism’ have come to mean roughly the same thing. They understand them to embody a more or less coded language for getting people to come to church. As a result of this, the very idea of mission becomes a reason to distrust formal religion altogether.

So perhaps we need to think about mission quite differently. Rather than anxiously striving to meet the goals and objectives of our own mission action plans, the time may have

come for learning together with those we believe we are evangelising,<sup>2</sup> so that our mission and theirs become two aspects of a single way of being, a way of being in *koinonia* with all who seek, with all who pray, with being in solidarity with them in a *koinonia* of silence. We already see this happening in the context of demonstrations and peaceful protests on both sides of the Atlantic. Implicit in all these protests is a call to repentance, reconciliation and renewal. They should be seen as signs of hope, rather than messages of doom.

So the silence I am describing is not simply a matter of not using language. It is more about a shared burden of desire, a common willing of new life, a determination to live in hope in the best sense of the word. Contemplative practice, or contemplative prayer in action, moves us from simply wishing that things were different to being part of a restorative, recreative process. The lockdown months that now seem so long ago have shown that being part of this process is open to all. No particular skills are required. You just have to turn up and be ready to do the job – even from the comfort of your own desk or armchair.

I began work on these papers before the covid pandemic. On revisiting them I felt that these words perhaps lacked substance, that they were not anchored to any particular reality. Covid supplied that reality, not because of its intrinsic nature as a highly infectious disease which we were at the time unable to control, let alone eradicate, but as a wake-up call to make real the theology and the politics of hope. I believe these are implicit in the Beatitudes, in all the hungering and thirsting that is given to us to know in the times we are living in, in all our very real poverty of spirit, in our hunger for God.

For many of us, the general sense of isolation brought about by lockdown, not to mention the very real isolation experienced by those on whom self-isolation was imposed for medical reasons (and still is for those with long covid), has left us with a need for something more than human company. This need will often be revealed in the way we use what we used to call ‘spare’ time – time when all that can be done, or said, given our particular circumstances has been done and said.

With Covid, we experienced a great deal more of this ‘spare’ time. Some of it will have been filled with various activities not normally undertaken, many of them good, or at least harmless, others violent or dangerous to the self or to another person. The sharp rise in domestic abuse and the reported decline in the nation’s mental health both point to these

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<sup>2</sup> I owe much of this thinking to a paper given to the Modern Church South West regional group by Bishop John Saxbee and to his book *Liberal Evangelism: A Flexible Response To The Decade*, London, SPCK (1994)

unhappy possibilities. The devastating knock-on effects of gaming, where the line between fantasy and the horrific realities of school and crowd shootings seems barely to have been drawn, point to another. But whatever was going on in our minds and lives during lockdown, there was a void to be filled, an emptiness that had always been there, but which, until lockdown, was easily filled by work or activity. Surprisingly, I think this sense of loss, and the emptiness we experience with it, is the kind of poverty of spirit that promises the Kingdom, provided we face into the emptiness and own it for what it is, a potentially creative silence which is of the unnameable God.

The emptiness, the silence, the need, as we experienced it during lockdown, returned all our short term aims, ambitions and priorities back on themselves, or back to us, perhaps, leaving us with prayer that was lamentation for ourselves and for our world. We could say that the same thing happened in regard to many of the Church's outreach exercises, including those that come under the heading of mission and evangelism. Silence invariably returns us to itself and to the heart of the world's pain and need which is where evangelism ought to begin.

Evangelism then takes the form of a question which does not embody an answer, but invites a further stepping into the unknown, while at the same time finding ourselves continually being returned to a place that we have always known, arriving 'where we started and knowing the place for the first time'.<sup>3</sup> It's a little like a *déjà vu* when you suddenly remember having been in a situation, or heard something, before but can't quite place the 'how' or the 'when' of it, can't fit the pieces together, as it were.

There is a neurological explanation for these moments.<sup>4</sup> But there is also a far more important spiritual one which has to do with hearing something which has been heard many times before, something that has been told before, and that invites a new way of interpreting truth for the times we live in and for our own lives. These kind of *déjà vu* experiences seldom result from our own actions or even states of mind. They seem to come to meet us, as if from nowhere. Their 'meeting' us, speaks of an encounter with something, or someone, to which we might give the name 'love'. The meeting begins at depth, in the unspoken, but it will also

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<sup>3</sup> T.S. Elliot 'Little Gidding' *The Four Quartets*

<sup>4</sup> See Anne Cleary 'The Psychology of *Déjà vu*' in *Association for Psychological Science* in which she discusses familiarity based on memory, pertaining to words, images and facial recognition <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/the-psychology-of-deja-vu.html> downloaded 14th November, 2019

involve exchange, something given and received through the mutual give and take of conversation, through telling and understanding.

### **Encounter and understanding as telling**

While mission emphasises service, or ‘doing’, evangelism is about a particular way of ‘telling’. The complementary doing and telling finds its unspoken purpose in the smile or look of recognition evoked in the other, a manifestation of God silently at work in the hearts of all parties involved, an epiphany moment, a moment of unspoken connection.<sup>5</sup>

The relatively new phenomenon of zoom makes these epiphany moments all the more poignant. We encounter a person but there is no sense in which we can fully embrace them. Even so, as a result of the enforced separation we have experienced during lockdown and covid, we have learned to listen and look out for a commonality of understanding which we perhaps took for granted in pre-covid days when we could rely entirely on real time presence and ‘body language’.

An epiphany moment occurs when a person sees or understands a truth which they have always known. So *missio dei*, is the sending out of God’s people to serve the world in God’s love, a love which is released in a moment of mutual recognition of the enduring nature of divine love. It makes the one doing the missional work receptive to the indwelling ‘Christ love’ in the other person, who may have a deep sense of the spiritual but little time for formal religion. To be poor in spirit means being vulnerable to the possibility of encountering the love of Christ in the ways that others encounter him, especially, perhaps, when they do not think of themselves as Christian.

It follows that the work of mission allows the love of God to be shared, or reciprocated, in all work done in love for God. Interfaith peace work, both theological and practical (as when different faiths and denominational agencies join together to relieve suffering) does God’s work in the world more effectively than it would if it were driven solely by any one religion’s mission agenda. The ‘converting’ occurs when those being served experience the love of God in the unspoken loving witness of the one doing the mission. This is contemplative practice at its best, an uninterrupted giving and receiving of the love of God in and for the world.

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<sup>5</sup> James Joyce coined the term ‘epiphany’ to describe those evanescent moments of understanding when a person sees through the objective reality of a thing or idea to its deeper essence or significance. *Stephen Hero*, New Directions Paperback edition p.213

So, far from being introspective pietists, contemplatives are ‘go-betweens’. They do mission in being constantly vulnerable to God and to the needs and suffering of people. Their focus is both inward and outward, so they are resourced from the Spirit within. This is how Mission becomes an outworking of the Good News.

The same principle applies to evangelism. Evangelism, as the word suggests, is about telling the Good News, but the telling is not limited to speech. St. Francis, like the psalmists who came before him, declares how the whole of creation witnesses to God. ‘The heavens declare his glory’ (Ps. 19:1). St. Francis, in his *Canticle of the Sun*, speaks of the purpose of life beginning and ending with praise and love for God. The work of evangelism is to live the Gospel in such a way as to declare the glory of God, so that our ‘declaring’ rekindles the fire that is *already* within those to whom we proclaim it. Evangelists, like those doing mission, are go-betweens. They connect others with God in and through the Spirit already abiding in them and in the work they do.

The purpose of mission is therefore to re-awaken an innate desire for the spiritual, the holy, the sacred, using any language available to us, but always beginning from a place of deep inner silence and always returning us to God. Our language about the Christian faith, how we ‘speak’ the Good News, needs to resonate with whatever spiritual language a person may already know, or with which they can identify.

Perhaps this is why it can be difficult to define what the Good News is. There is no one word, except to say that all words are contained in the Incarnate Word, in the *logos*. But there are as many different ways of speaking the good news to the world as there are people living in it and, with the advances in communication technology in only the last two decades, our missional reach has grown, and grown more quickly than it was ever dreamed possible before the arrival of the internet. This is not to suggest that in order to do mission well a person needs to have honed their IT skills to perfection, but that he or she does need to be an effective communicator.

To do mission well we need to be communicators not only of the faith, but of what is vital and life changing about it for every living person and for the global community.<sup>6</sup> We need to see God in all things, including the dark and the ugly. This, as Rowan Williams suggests, is revolutionary stuff.<sup>7</sup> It changes a person, and it can change the Church. The

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<sup>6</sup> Here, and in much of what follows, I understand the words ‘mission’ and ‘evangelism’ as mutually embracing.

<sup>7</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury’s Address



Church, in all its noisiness and activism, needs to be changed from within, from within the deep silence of prayer. Prayer is a recognition of a person's need for God, and of the Church's need for God to be its sole *raison d'être*.

So the Church, in its missional task, needs to be poor in regard to many of the material things it values; status, success and power being only three of them. Instead, it needs to recognise its need for God. When it fails to do this, people walk away. The comedian, Lenny Bruce puts it well when he says that 'Every day people are straying away from the Church and going back to God.'<sup>8</sup> Anything that hampers this owning of our need for God gets in the way of the message, the Good News the Church is called to bring to a spiritually barren world.

One of the things that can put people off its message, and all that the Church has to offer, is the Christian tendency to contain and confine the message within the conceptual parameters of any one theology (including liberal theology) or churchmanship and to claim either implicitly or explicitly that this is the only way to know God's Christ, or to be Church. The distrust that increasingly fragments the Church's life thrives in the consumer climate generated in this kind of competition. As a result, the Church fears failure more than anything and is consequently ever more controlling of the unquantifiable and spiritual.

To make matters worse, where there is control there is exclusion. Exclusion then morphs into a form of protectionism, a church 'brand' for the likeminded, leading to church tribalisms of one kind or another. You need to talk the right talk to be accepted.

But perhaps talk itself is part of the problem. It is easy to repeat the Good News in an almost formulaic way without giving much thought to how it is being received by those around us. Furthermore, the news is only news when it is heard and understood for the first time. And the news is only good when it announces itself in a spark of recognition, an 'epiphany moment' in the heart of the one who is hearing it.

So what we are conveying through missional service and through the work of evangelism is the 'already'.<sup>9</sup> We want to convey the idea that not only is God *already* at home in each one of us but, mysteriously, God is *already* at work in the world. This is the heart of the good news of the Gospel. The task of mission and evangelism is to reveal this

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<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Doney and Martin Wroe, 'You don't have to choose between Religion and Spirituality', *Lifelines: Notes on Life and Love, Faith and Doubt*, Unbound, London (2018)

<sup>9</sup> the realised eschatology of the 'now and the not yet'.

truth and not simply to tell it in ways that may be convincing to the teller, but less so to the one they are speaking to.

The idea of a God who is already among us and alongside us, even in our darkest moments, cannot be proved in words or demonstrated by good works, unless it is first known in the heart and lived out from a place of acceptance and forgiveness. The most effective mission is service rendered from within this place of knowing that we are all accepted and forgiven in Christ, that we *already* belong.

There are many who yearn to know this place for themselves. You could describe this yearning as the collective desire to know God which the theologian, Daniel Hardy calls ‘the social meaning (that is) rooted in the truth of God in order to find the fullness of the Church’.<sup>10</sup> So in its work of mission and evangelism, the Church begins by knowing the truth of God’s acceptance and forgiveness as a constant ‘returning’ to its own source in God, in order to be enlivened and challenged by the energy of that source.

The challenge for the Church, then, lies in allowing this already existing truth to ‘shape’ itself around those we are trying to reach when we do mission. No two ‘shapings’ will be the same and yet all will derive from the same ineffable source. All will derive from a place of ‘unlearning’ the false ideas we cherish about God and, in ways which may be hidden from the evangelist, return Christ to those the Church is called to serve. This becomes its *modus operandi* for silent evangelism.

So mission and evangelism, taken together as a single proclamation of the Good News, involves returning God to people and not just trying, by any number of means, to bring people to God – in other words to persuade them to think as we do and then bring them to church. The parable of the good shepherd is about God coming to people and bringing them back to himself. It suggests that God does his own mission. He brings people into the deep mystery of the holy, in the ordinariness of such a moment as the recovering of a lost sheep.

The spiritual but not religious (SBNRs) are yearning for a sense of the holy. They will be looking for theologies (if they are looking for theology at all) that help them make sense of their lives and that speak of a God who is with them, especially in difficult times. They will find this God in the person or church that speaks of mercy, of deep understanding. They will find Him in the community that knows itself to be accepted and forgiven but does not feel it

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel W. Hardy, *Finding the Church*, SCM Press, London (2011) p.240

their duty to compel others to know God in the way the Church does, or even, perhaps, to come to church at all.

*A few possible discussion questions*

*Addressing the data-driven age and information-laden lives we lead; Are we searching for information as a substitute for the 'unknowable'?*

*With advancing age, how do we meet our own 'emptiness' head on and make it productive?*

*What is truth?*

*Is Modern Church a good example of koinonia? How might it be better?*

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