

Sermon for 5th February, 2017 – The fourth of the five marks of mission

To respond to human need by loving service

(focusing on reconciliation in personal relationships)

+ This morning we've arrived at the fourth of the five marks of mission which are the focus of the current sermon series. The fourth mark of mission is *the response to human need by loving service*.

Each of us will understand something different when we hear the word mission in a Christian context. My understanding is that mission should be in the DNA of every Christian. Our mission is to make God known in the world, through the saving grace of his Son Jesus Christ, which we do in the power of the Holy Spirit. Evangelism is the variety of ways in which we set about making God known in the world – evangelism is our toolbox if you like. So as Christians we can't help but engage in mission, and we do this using the methods of evangelism which best suit our skills and abilities in a given situation. Perhaps more than some of the other marks of mission, loving service in response to human need is practical, it's something we can get to grips with. All it requires of us really is to assess the situation and choose how to react.

There's an apocryphal story about the late Queen Mary, who was out walking one day with some companions when it started to pour with rain. There weren't enough umbrellas to go round, so the Queen darted into the nearest doorway to take shelter. The rain didn't let up so after a bit she knocked on the door and asked if she could borrow an umbrella, which she promised to return. The home owner had absolutely no idea who the wet and bedraggled woman in front of her was and she rather reluctantly went and found an umbrella, which had seen better days. The next day there was another knock on the door and this time it was a man in a smart uniform, who handed back the umbrella together with a thank you note from the Queen. The home owner was mortified, appalled that she hadn't given the Queen her best umbrella, or better still offered her shelter.

Having assessed the situation she made a choice, which she later regretted. As the letter to the Hebrews cautions us: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* (Heb 13:2)

The fourth mark of mission raises an intriguing question, which is what distinguishes loving service undertaken by Christians, from the countless acts of loving service those of other faiths and no faith willingly engage in? In today's Gospel Jesus answers that question when he says: *'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven'*. Jesus Christ the Light of the World tells us that we are to reflect his divine light into the world in which we live. Christians are to be visible lights, not lights hidden under a basket. We're not to hang back and watch when we encounter human need, we must get stuck in and other people are supposed to see what we do. But - any glory we may gain through our actions is not ours, but is to be reflected back, towards God. Because everything we do is done in order to glorify God. Our good works – including loving service – aren't undertaken to impress others, nor will they earn us brownie points with God. The glory is all God's and the reason we choose to serve God is in response to his great love for us. God is love. We believe that everything comes from God, so by loving what he loved into being, his creation, we are aligning our will with that of our Creator.

Loving God and loving our neighbour were Jesus' answers to the scheming Pharisees and Sadducees, who asked him which was the greatest commandment, trying to trip him up. He said to them: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.* Matt 22 36 -39. And in John's Gospel, on the night before he died Jesus showed his disciples how to set about fulfilling this

commandment. To their amazement he took off his outer robe, tied a towel around himself and began to wash their feet. Simon Peter protested – it's one thing to be the one offering loving service and quite another to be on the receiving end. But Jesus was having none of it, unless Simon Peter acquiesced and had his feet washed, he could go, now.

Good works, responding to human need, doesn't always go smoothly and with the best of intentions it can go disastrously wrong. Some years ago the good ladies of a church in Chiswick, west London decided to take their turn at feeding the hungry at a nearby homeless shelter. Recipes were discussed, casserole dishes dusted off, a delicious meal prepared for the clients. The problem was the homeless didn't much like chorizo with lentils or Charlotte Russe, and they made their feelings plain. The volunteers were deeply offended and almost gave up on the whole idea, but they rallied and the next meal of sausage and mash followed by apple crumble was a huge success. The God who is always ready to love us and forgive us was glorified, as the cooks forgave the fussy eaters, meeting them where they were and responding to their needs. Better still, some useful alliances were formed and the volunteers went on to assist the homeless clients in other ways, providing advice on dealing with the authorities, offering literacy sessions and helping often dysfunctional lives to be rebuilt.

Jean Vanier, the RC philosopher and theologian, founded the l'Arche Community which cares for those who are unable to live without assistance. To start with he offered to share his home with two men who had psychological problems. As he ministered to them, he came to understand that he was actually receiving far more than he was giving. This holy man realised that it's through loving service that community is formed, differences overcome and lives changed. His practical insight was tested last January at the primates meeting at Lambeth Palace, when Vanier led the deeply divided Archbishops in the liturgy of foot washing. The primates discovered that kneeling one in front of another, washing each other's feet as they prayed for one another, altered the mood of the meeting. Differences were not overcome, but the focus of those present shifted. Justin Welby is quoted as saying that he felt quite unravelled by the powerful experience. Following Christ's example and through the simplicity of ministering to one another, a new sense of closeness and community was forged. Personal relations were reconciled through this act of loving service.

Vanier's initiative with the Archbishops could have gone horribly wrong. As the woman who lent her old umbrella to Queen Mary discovered, responding to human need is potentially risky and we might make the wrong call. But the alternative is to do nothing, to hide our light under a basket which Jesus himself warns us against doing. Engaging in mission asks us to step out from the shadows, to shine the light of Christ into an often dark world, and St Teresa of Avila reminds us why:

Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours." Amen.