

Exodus 24: 12-18  
2 Peter 1: 16-21  
Matthew 17: 1-9

If you have been at the Cathedral at all over the last six weeks you will know that we have been doing a sermon series on the Five Marks of Mission.

If you haven't, you know now!

It is my job today as we mark the Transfiguration of Christ and head into Lent to offer a synopsis – whatever exactly that means.

So, what have we learnt?

Well, we've the learn the following:

One, always give your best umbrella to someone who asks for it however bedraggled they look

Two, never use a whip on a horse unless you are in the Grand National. It's your legs, stupid!

Three, when viewing someone's garden, never praise God for the beauty of his handiwork, you will just upset the gardener.

It is great how we remember the anecdotes!

Joking aside, all the sermons are available on the Cathedral website, so you can, if you like, review them and see what your take home points might be.

For me, a key message – may be the key message – is that mission is not about us. It's about God. God's mission. Not ours.

Of course, this is easier to say, much harder to do. It's a lesson, I suspect, that we constant have to learn and re-learn.

I'd like, however, to talk about something different today, which I hope will be an appropriate way to conclude our sermon series.

And it is this...

I want to talk about bad temperedness and division...and mission.

I will spare you the gory details of my own bad temperedness and sometimes alienation from neighbour suffice to say that this is probably not a bad place to start for all of us.

But on Wednesday I was at an event in Taunton thinking about the mission of the Church in so-called priority parishes...

...that is parishes, urban or rural, where there is significant levels of poverty and marginalisation.

Tough places to work.

What's distinctive about these parishes? What are the challenges?

I was asked in light of my previous parish experience to share some reflections on 'Bringing alienated communities together in the wake of Brexit'

And in my short talk, I spoke out against the demonization of the white working class by many sectors of society, including sadly at times the Church.

And I shared how we in the parish I was in before I came here tried to bring Somali Muslims and white British together in a climate of substantial alienation and mistrust.

After my talk we broke up into small groups to discuss what I'd shared and I was taken aback at how bad tempered the discussion was.

God help the mission of the Church if even Church leaders can't debate these things peaceably.

And then to the previous week.

The week before last I was at General Synod for the already infamous 'take note' debate on the House of Bishops report on marriage and same sex relationships after the Shared Conversations (conversations that the Church has been having on these matters).

It wasn't so much that the debate in Synod was bad-tempered – after all it is Synod not the lower house of parliament! – but my word are we divided.

What hope, I ask, is there for the mission of the Church in the face of such divisions?

And finally, if we want to talk about division, let's look closer to home – in this city.

And the saga about the memory of Edward Colston which has hit national headlines this week.

It is not just about us. There are a number of organisations in the firing line.

But the sad fact is that we are divided from – we are not interacting well with – some people who take a different view from us.

Bad temperedness and division. What does this mean for the mission of the Church?

So, my first point.

We, the Church, cannot add fuel to the fire.

We must be reconcilers, peacemakers, bringers of calm.

It's about careful speaking. Not soundbites. Not tweets.

And surely the idea of reconciliation runs through all the marks of mission – and all the sermons we've preached in this series. (And it does. I have checked.)

But continuing with some of the themes I have raised, I would like to spend a little bit longer thinking about the Church's division over human sexuality.

And how we might respond – if we are serious about mission.

In a book on ethics, there is a chapter by Rowan Williams titled 'Making moral decisions'. I often set it for my students.

The chapter began life as a speech Rowan gave to the General Synod some years ago and you can see very clearly that it was a speech given in the context of the Church's division over human sexuality with Rowan desperately trying to lift the Church's eyes heavenward, to persuade us to leave behind the apparent safety of our various camps, and to find the better path.

'It went down like a lead balloon', Rowan said when I asked him about the chapter when he was in Bristol the other day.

And this surely is to our shame as a Church.

How do Christians make moral decisions?

Well, no different from anyone else, Rowan says, rather neatly.

Except – and it's quite an important – except.

Except, he says, that we are involved in different relations to people who do not confess our faith, namely a relationship with Jesus Christ.

And in light of this, we have got to try and ensure that whatever we do – whether it be on human sexuality or anything else – that it shows something of the character of the God who calls us and sends us out.

But if only it was so simple.

What the Church's disagreement on human sexuality shows is that what reveals something of the character of God for one person does anything but for another – and there seems to be no way out.

People who stand in a different place to me on matters of human sexuality read the same bible as me.

They strive to be obedient to God just like me.

They seek to act with integrity and in good faith, just like me.

And yet we end up in an entirely different place.

What are we to do?

It is not unity at all costs, Rowan says.

That's not a Christian goal.

"Christian unity is Christ-shaped", he says, "or it is empty" (p. 14)

Trying to get the Church to view their disagreements over sexuality through fresh eyes, Rowan gives the example of his profound opposition to nuclear weapons.

Again, he says, people who inhabit a different position to him on nuclear weapons – a position he can scarcely comprehend – read the same bible as him.

They strive to be obedient to God – like him.

They seek like him to act with integrity.

And yet they end up in an entirely different place.

The desire to cut and run, Rowan says, is immense. How can I be in Communion with these people?

And yet, and yet...he says.

I am forced to ask what is there in this position – that is not my own – that I might recognise "as a gift, as a showing of Christ" (p. 10)

Christianity requires that of us, doesn't it?

Be careful of deciding in advance where the non-negotiable boundaries lie, Rowan says.

Resist the temptation to be too sure of our own purity

Can we see in the position of the other something of a gift, a showing of Christ?

The Church seems to be getting ever closer to saying it cannot.

But this would surely be a failing, a failure of our Divine calling.

So, whether it is Brexit, Edward Colston, or our attitude to people who love people of the same sex, we need to revisit our divisions and for the sake of God's mission look again to see if we can see Christ in those with whom we profoundly disagree.

Today, we remember both Moses and Jesus on the mountainside.

The appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire.

Jesus' face shone like the sun and his clothes were a dazzling white.

Heaven and earth collide.

And Peter says to Jesus 'Let me make three dwellings here'.

His remark seems so clearly to point to the mistake we can so easily make when we think about mission.

It is not about us, ultimately. It is about God.

And rather underlining the fact that Peter has got it wrong the voice from the cloud, we are told, doesn't even wait until he has finished speaking but cuts him off!

"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him" (verse 5)

As we go into Lent, as we reflect again on the mission of God's Church to a hurting world, as we think about our divisions, let's recommit ourselves to listening...listening to Him, the one who gave everything that we might live.

Amen