

Sermon: Five Marks of Mission

Mark 4 – To respond to Human Need by Loving Service, (Part 2).

Sir John Pentland Mahaffy, was an Irish classicist and became provost of Trinity College Dublin in 1914 at the age of 75. Aspiring to that post and learning that the then incumbent was ill, he was heard to have remarked, "Nothing trivial, I hope." On another occasion he was asked by a local clergyman what he thought of his sermon to which he replied, "It was like the peace and mercy of God". The man was deeply flattered and wanted to know why he was making such a sublime comparison. Well retorted the provost, "It was like the peace of God because it passed all understanding and (it was) like his mercy because it showed every sign of enduring for ever".

With that in mind I shall endeavour to keep to the point and try not to over-run ...!

Now those of you who have tipped up regularly over the past few Sundays will realize that we have reached the 5th week in our sermon series focusing upon the *Five Marks of Mission*. You could be therefore be forgiven for thinking that this ought to be the last in the series, but we are not quite there yet. Last week canon Nicola preached on the fourth mark, this being: *To respond to human need by loving service*. She mentioned how serving others doesn't always go smoothly and finished by giving an instance of reconciling difference through acts of service and I want to continue that theme today. But first we need to refresh our minds about what it is we are meant to be thinking about when we speak about MISSION.

Briefly, it's a concept that has undergone something of a sea-change over recent decades. For many centuries mission came to be seen as something that the Church *did* in order to spread the Christian faith but in ways that became associated, for instance, with colonial expansionism and with certain questionable outcomes. This type of missionary model was challenged for being paternalistic in its approach motivated by an expansionist ethic and the conquest of other religions and cultures.

However, during the latter part of the 20th century there was a gradual repositioning of how mission in the Christian Church ought to be regarded

and this was achieved by reconnecting with the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity underpinned by the movement of reconciling love. Here the motive focuses upon what's called the *missio Dei*, or the mission that flows from the very heart of God. To participate in mission, according to David Bosch, in his seminal work *Transforming Mission*, is therefore to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, he goes on to say that this mission is larger than the mission of the Church: "The *missio Dei* is God's activity, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church may be privileged to participate" (2001: Orbis Books p391).

Now, if we believe that God's great saving purpose is made manifest through the reconciling love of Christ, then besides proclamation of the gospel, besides its commitment to teach, baptise, and nurture new believers; besides the desire to seek to transform unjust structures of society, the primary task to which we become engaged is to point to the significance of reconciliation in our relationships and in the communities where we live and work and go about our business. And when we talk about attending *to human need by loving service*, it is prompted by this endeavour towards reconciliation and a key understanding of *missio Dei* is to witness to this priority and to remind society of its importance.

That was what the apostle Paul was upbraiding the Christian community at Corinth about. Their quarrelling over allegiance to various apostles seemed to fly in the face of the spiritual maturity to which the membership aspired. Paul says: "I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather ... as infants in Christ" (1Cor. 3:1).

Not ready for the solid food of the gospel – he likens them to still being in the flesh of the world. They are still "fleshy" he says because they're acting as though Christ has not changed any of that. They have failed to realize how the gospel of the cross has brought a new creation. They are still acting as though the pursuits and the goals that the world promotes are determinative and defining their identity. They are, Paul says, acting like little children.

Of course, we recognize something of ourselves in his admonishment. And Jesus is identifying something similar in the gospel reading from the Sermon on the Mount (Mth 5: 21ff), where he speaks about harboring malice, or bad-mouthing those we fall out with. He calls his listeners to behave in a way that is more generous and forgiving.

Loving one's neighbour does not necessarily mean liking, or even agreeing with that person, but it does mean respecting the humanity of the other and it does mean not diminishing that person to an object of ridicule. In a dispute there is the temptation to objectify the opposing party by belittling their point of view, belittling the individual themselves – 'oh he, or she's just an idiot ...' And when it involves deep passions running through the social psyche, then this can quickly slide into demonizing, or de-humanising the other.

Such attitudes diminish the gift we bring of ourselves to the altar.

... if you remember that your brother or sister, has something against you, (Jesus says) leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift (*Mth 3: 23b-24*).

Being reconciled involves respecting the other's need to feel valued, respected, and given dignity in order for them to become more receptive to dialogue - and it is here that the work then needs to be done restoring value and trust, brokering a way forward.

I've been watching the TV series *Unforgotten*. It's a multilayered crime series investigating the lives of three people each with histories of child abuse whose adult lives become entangled in a web of enquiry about the death of their respective abusers. It was a fascinating drama which exposed the way those victims of abuse closed down the parts of their story that had scarred their early lives and continued to torment their subsequent relationships in ways that were corrosive of trust.

Stephen Grosz, in his book *The Examined Life: how we lose and find ourselves*, observes how "when we can't find a way of telling our story, our story tells us - we dream these stories, we develop symptoms, or we find ourselves acting in ways we don't understand". A theory that I felt became evident in the drama *Unforgotten*. Eventually the investigation allowed those stories to be articulated and it did so magnificently in ways that suggested fragments of hope and signs of reconciliation.

But it doesn't always work that way reconciliation is costly, it can be painful, it requires self-giving and it may well involve living with contradictions. The point I am trying to make this morning is that reconciliation lies at the heart of

the Christian understanding of God's great gift of Godself and, as such, we are challenged to witness to this priority and to remind ourselves and society of its importance. When we gather, Sunday by Sunday, to celebrate the Eucharist what we are celebrating is a meal in which the gospel of redemption is acted out again and again for us. In St Paul's words:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing of the body of Christ? (ICor.10: 16 ff)

It's what the Church calls 'anamnesis' a memorial prayer of remembrance, calling the Eucharistic community to remember that which forms their whole identity as a community of faith. There, in the form of bread and wine, is presented the tangible reminder of the sacramental gift of reconciling love – and the dismissal to the Eucharist sends us out to inhabit that gift of reconciling love so that others may come to inhabit the story too.

The point I've been trying to make is that the *Missio dei*, the mission that flows from the heart of God, is a mission of reconciling love. If this be so, then the Christian mission is called to witness to this priority and to remind society of its importance and to do so through acts of loving service and generous living. It is a deeply costly ministry and one that drives us back again and again to the story that motivates that mission: the story of the incarnation, the story of the Easter faith, where the wounds of the risen Christ become in themselves signs of new life. They become charged with new meaning from something destructive to something life-renewing. It's the story that flows from the very heart of God and calls us into his mission through acts of loving service.

The Hengrave Prayer.

Lord Jesus, your sign of reconciliation is the cross in all its breadth and length and height and depth. Teach us to share it with you and with our sisters and brothers, so that we may learn to act justly, walk humbly, love tenderly, and so, waiting upon the Spirit, become instruments of your peace, to the glory of God the Father. Amen