

## Holy Week 2012, Coventry Cathedral

### *'As lambs among wolves'* (Luke 10.3)

Jesus said, Jesus says *'Go! I am sending you out as lambs among wolves.'* (Luke 10.3) As Christians we are called not to the comfort and safety of a bunk bed in the ark but to a radical and exhilarating dependence on God out there in His world, *'having nothing yet possessing everything'* (2 Cor.6.10). God's mission by definition is *outward* bound. As a called people we are a *sent* people. We are called, as Paul writes, to *'walk towards the outsiders, redeeming the time'* (Col.4.5). As God's mission in the 'natural' is impossible - like lambs living among wolves - we in the 'natural', the 'old Adam' within us, shrink from it preferring to stay on the safe ground as sheep amongst sheep making sensible unriskey decisions. In so doing we deprive ourselves and others of the exhilaration of discovering God's amazing grace and provision as we step out in faith. Jesus later asks those sent out *'as lambs among wolves'*: *'When I sent you out without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?' 'Nothing', they answered.'* (Luke 22.35) In the glorious economy of God it is in our insufficiency we discover God's sufficiency, in our weakness his strength. The key to this discovery is obedience, having the *courage* to obey. I think of the courage of the service men and women trained at Kineton in bomb disposal, putting their lives at risk to save the lives of others, and several have died in this endeavour and then I reflect on the courage or otherwise of myself and the Church to which we belong and the risks we do or do not take for the Gospel's sake. It needs courage to cross boundaries, to go into unfamiliar and even hostile and dangerous territory. It needs courage to expose ourselves to this vulnerability. But when we do, we discover God is out there waiting for us in the hunger, the pain, the struggles and even perhaps in the hostility of those around us and we discover too that God has much to teach us and give us in these encounters.

Coventry Cathedral perhaps above all others stands for such Christ-like boundary crossing. The building itself, so thoroughly *oikumenical*, speaks of God's unboundaried love, God in whom all nations meet. The Cross of Nails on the altar speaks -and speaks across the world - of the God, our God, who in Christ unites even enemies. The new Cathedral has from the beginning celebrated God in all things, in industry, in the arts, in urban in rural, in national and international life. It sings out Christ *for* the world, Christ *in* the

world. As well as offering great riches of worship within the building and hospitality of all kinds to the wider community, it has both pioneered and inspired the ministry of reconciliation in many different contexts all over the world. But the ministry I particularly want to celebrate and highlight, because it actually models something for all of us whoever we are and wherever we live is that of Greg Bartlem and Keith Parr. This is about being out and about with young people where *they* are, meeting them both geographically and spiritually where they are and walking with them on their journey. It is a way of ministry that is being continued now by Greg and Catherine and others in their ministry of *Urban Hope* where again they go to where people are, offering love and welcome and practical service in the form of café, of 'Coffee Tots' and welcoming space for all kinds of people outside the visible church. '*Walk towards the outsiders, redeeming the time, making the most of God's opportunities*' writes Paul.

If we are listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches, surely one of the signs of God's Kingdom breaking in is the communities of faith grown and growing outside of church buildings. I'm sure we all know the story told by George Mcloud when working in the Gorbals, an area of considerable deprivation and vandalism in Glasgow. A stone was thrown at the East window of his church dislodging the letter 'E' from the words 'Glory to God in the Highest'. So the East window now read 'Glory to God in the High St'. This, he said, is what the Gospel is all about. God is to be glorified out there in his world amidst real life in the streets of Coventry and the fields of Warwickshire '*seven whole days not one in seven*'. But how easily God's chosen people become God's frozen people, frozen by fear, by apathy, by habit. How easily God's pilgrim people become God's static people, resisting God's transforming life and the adventure of faith. There was a powerful and somewhat shaming TV mini-series '*Reverse Missionaries*' which involved missionaries from Jamaica, Kenya and India bringing the gospel to the places from which British missionaries had come bringing the gospel to their own countries. They found the British churches pretty empty and with little life and youth. Each of the reverse missionaries, a Jamaican man, a Kenyan man and an Indian woman was hugely inspiring, radiant with the love of Christ and went out and about amongst the people the British congregations had more or less given up on. When they brought the new people, often untidy, noisy, unchurched and

unpredictable into Church to worship, this new life was not entirely welcomed. The congregations or many in them had settled for something less than the precarious joyful Gospel and the God who makes all things new. And who are we to point the finger? Lord have mercy on us all.

So how do we understand our part in God's mission? If the premise of our missionary thinking and action is that we have everything to give and nothing to receive, we are not true disciples of Christ. Disciples, by definition, are *learners*. We are sent and we go not that others may be converted to us or become like us but that all of us may be drawn closer to Christ. When we, in Jesus' name, honour the stranger we give space to God in the encounter and show that we have something to receive as well as to offer. When Jesus sees the Samaritan woman at the well, *he* asks *her* for a drink. His humility and love in asking her shows her how precious and valuable she is to God. In Christ, mission is not, ministry is not one-way traffic. It is exchange. We remember on Thursday as Jesus washes the feet of protesting Peter, that all of us need both to love and to receive love, to minister and to be ministered unto. When we give hospitality in Jesus' name we receive in the encounter. When we disciple, we are discipled. When we give, we receive. When we preach the Gospel, as Paul reminds us (1 Cor. 9.23) ) we share in its blessings. When we honour God, he honours us. As disciples, we are learners. The Holy Spirit surely reminds us that there is more '*growing in the knowledge of God*' (Col.1.10) and more '*growing up into Him who is the head, that is Christ*' (Eph.4.15) for all of us to do. Charles Williams – a great influence on C.S. Lewis – described three stages in the Christian journey: first: the old man in the old way, second, the new man in the old way and third, the new man in the new way. How readily we occupy that middle ground, 'the new man/woman in the old way', resisting the change that God is longing to work in us. Auden wrote: '*We would rather be ruined than changed.*' The question is: do we actually *want* to let God change us? On *his* terms, not ours? Perhaps there is no more important question as we focus this week on the way of the cross

There was a powerful documentary a few weeks ago *Making Bradford British* which took eight people, each of whom lived in a different kind of ghetto in or around Bradford, eight people of different socio-economic, cultural and faith backgrounds. Each of them lived very much in their own little world sharing

the prejudices of those they lived among about those who lived in different ghettos. The programme brought these eight people together to live under one roof and then to experience life in the shoes of one of the others. Having to live together as they did with those they would never normally speak to or get to know was a painful, chastening but hugely growing experience as they became more and more aware of the prejudices they had unwittingly been carrying for so long. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book on Christian community *'Life Together'* argues that we have to be disillusioned, to become aware of our prejudices and illusions – and this is the work of the Holy Spirit who leads us into the truth – before we are ready to let God build His community among us. We need to let God make us bigger people, to let God enlarge our hearts and enlighten our minds. *'Come to Him'*, writes Peter, and *'let yourselves be built as living stones'* (1 Pet.2.4). He is the builder not us. The fledgling Christian communities to which Paul wrote were full of all sorts of prejudices about those who were different in their own or other Christian communities, prejudices which Paul sought to challenge and address. To the super-spiritual and judgemental Christians (*'pneumatikoi'*) in Corinth, he entreated, *'Open wide your hearts to us, as we have opened wide our hearts to you'*.

One way we can help this to happen and begin to discover our own unwitting prejudice is by getting out more, meeting people who are different from us who do not share our prejudices and among them those who themselves have prejudices about Christians. This is inevitably uncomfortable and demands courage. The life of St Francis and his brother friars has been described as one of *'radical unprotectedness'*. They discovered, like Paul, God's strength through their weakness, having nothing yet possessing everything. It is in this total dependence upon God when we move out of our comfort zone into the precarious life of *'lambs among wolves'* that we discover He is with us and He has gone before us.

It is about showing people that we are there with them and for them, no matter what. When I heard the words of the Jamaican missionary *'You have to be intensely involved in the vibes of the community and show you are there for them'*, they reminded me- in content if not in style - of the words of Pope John Paul 11 when he said *'What the world needs most is heralds of the kingdom who are deeply involved in the struggles of the world around them and are at*

*the same time contemplatives in love with God.'* This Thursday we remember especially the new commandment – *Mandatum Novum* -of Jesus. He has just washed the dirty stinking feet of his disciples. He commands them -and us today- to love others as He has loved them. Stephen Verney writes in *Fire in Coventry* (p.92) '*I must love like that with a love that utterly identifies itself with all ugly and perverted and lost people and stands on their side against the world and shares their darkness and suffering*'.

This cathedral of course points to the redeeming power of Christ bringing resurrection out of crucifixion but it remains quite deliberately organically connected still with the ruins of the old. Brokenness is not forgotten in the new life in Christ. The risen and ascended Christ bears the scars of crucifixion. It is by his wounds that we are healed. The great West screen is deliberately transparent to that which is still broken and in need of God's healing. It is to this ministry that each of us called, to be Christ, to bring Christ and to meet Christ in the world for which he died crossing boundaries '*as lambs among wolves*' in Jesus name and in the power of the Spirit.

If Jesus had played it safe, none of us would be here, we'd be going to hell in a handcart.

I'll close with the disturbing words of Martin Luther to those of us who are in danger of being too comfortable. The disturbance, I believe, is of the Holy Spirit: *The kingdom of God is to be in the midst of your enemies. And he who will not suffer this does not want to be of the kingdom of Christ; he wants to be among friends, to sit among roses and lilies not with the bad people but with the devout people. O you blasphemers and betrayers of Christ! If Christ had done what you are doing who would ever have been spared?*

If this makes us feel inadequate, so it should. But our inadequacy is not an obstacle but the necessary prerequisite for going out in His name and discovering his provision. Knowing that *we* can't but trusting that *He* can is sufficient. Let us pray for courage to trust and obey '*to walk towards the outsiders, redeeming the time*' (Col.4.5), to go out in His name and trusting in His power '*as lambs among wolves*'.

+John Stroyan